By the Spirit Emmanuel

Two Thousand Years Ago

Francisco Candido Xavier

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Francisco Candido Xavier

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Historic Episodes of
Christianity in the First Century

A Novel Dictated by the Spirit
Emmanuel

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In Private with Emmanuel[1]

To the Reader

Dear reader, before crossing the threshold of this narrative, it is only right that we present for your understanding a few comments about Emmanuel, the former senator Publius Lentulus, a descendant of the proud "gens Cornelia"[2]. The following comments were received from this kind spirit in the privacy of the spiritualist study group of Pedro Leopoldo in the State of Minas Gerais, Brazil.

By means of these comments you will become familiar with the Author's first words regarding this work, in addition to his deepest thoughts in the course of the endeavor, which took shape from

[1] The Spirit Guide of Francisco Candido Xavier, also known as Chico Xavier (April 2, 1910 - June 30, 2002); Xavier, a well known Brazilian medium, wrote around 400 books through psychography or automatic writing, a mediumistic process wherein he served as an instrument for the writings of discarnate spirit authors. – Tr.

[2] "GENS CORNELIA was one of the most distinguished Roman gentes [in Ancient Rome a gens (plural gentes) meant a clan or group of families sharing a common name], and produced a greater number of illustrious men than any other house in Rome. All of its great families belonged to the patrician order. The names of these patrician families were: Arvina, Blasio, Cethegus, Cinna, Cossus, Dolabella, Lentulus …." (Our bold) http://www.novaroma.org/nr/Category:Gens_Cornelia_(Nova_Roma). – Tr.

October 24, 1938 to February 9, 1939, according to the time his medium had available and without disturbing Emmanuel's other personal activities involving the suffering spirits who frequently seek him out and his efforts to spread Christian Spiritism in the "Homeland of the Cross"[3].

On September 7, 1938, he stated in a short message addressed to his incarnate friends:

"Someday, God willing, I shall tell you about the proud patrician Publius Lentulus so that you may learn something from the dolorous experiences of an indifferent and ungrateful soul. Let us await the appropriate time and Jesus' permission."

Emmanuel did not forget his promise, and on October 21 of the same year, he reiterated it in another message to the group:

"If Jesus' goodness will allow us, we shall begin our endeavor within a few days, as we await the opportunity to write about our memories of the time in which the Divine Master dwelt upon the earth.

"I do not know if we will accomplish this intent as well as we would like. Beforehand, however, I want to emphasize my trust in the mercy of our Father of Infinite Goodness."

In fact, on October 24, the medium Xavier received the first page of this book and on the following day Emmanuel reiterated:

"With Jesus' help, we shall start one more unpretentious endeavor. May God allow us to finish it accordingly.

"Now you will be able to verify the extent of my failures in the past; I feel comforted, however, in appearing with all the sincerity of my heart before the court of your consciences. Pray with me, asking Jesus that I may complete this endeavor in a way that this court will expand beyond your group so that my confession may be a guideline for all."

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[3] One of Brazil's monikers, referring to the constellation of the Southern Cross (*Crux Australis*) that shines in its skies, and which appears on its flag, various government emblems, national decorations, etc., to the extent that one line of Brazil's National Anthem goes: "The image of the Southern Cross shines resplendent." – Tr.

Throughout the psychographic process, the author never missed the opportunity to teach humility and faith to those around him. On December 30, 1938, he remarked in another loving message:

"I thank you, my children, for your invaluable cooperation. I am making every effort to adapt as far as possible such an ancient story to the expressions favored in the modern world, but in telling about the truth, we are more than anything else led to penetrate the essence of things, events and teachings.

"For me, these memories have been very sweet but also very bitter; sweet because of recollections dear to me, but also profoundly painful because of the hardness of my heart, which was unable to profit from the precious hour that struck the clock of my life as a spirit two thousand years ago.

"May Jesus allow me to accomplish my objectives, presenting this work not as an appealing remembrance of my flawed personality, but as an example for those who are now working in the sowing and field of our Divine Master."

On other occasions, Emmanuel taught his incarnate collaborators the need for our spiritual connection with Jesus in the performance of all our endeavors. On January 4, 1939, he wrote the following prayer, still related to his memories of the remote past:

"Jesus, Merciful Lamb of the Father of all mercies, two thousand years have passed and my poor soul still relives those bitter and sad days!

"But what are two millennia, Lord, on the clock of eternity?

"I feel that your mercy responds to us in its impenetrable depths … Yes, time is the great treasure of humankind and twenty centuries, like twenty different lives, can be twenty days of trials, experiences and redemptive struggles.

"Only your goodness is infinite! Only your mercy can embrace all centuries and all beings, for in you lives the glorious synthesis of all earthly evolution, the divine yeast of all cultures, the sublime soul of all thoughts.

"Before my poor eyes appears the old Rome of my sorrows and my grievous failures … I still feel swathed in the misery of my weaknesses and I contemplate the monuments of human vanities … Political expressions, varying in their luster of liberty and strength, holders of authority and power, lords of wealth and intelligence, ephemeral greatnesses that last for only one fleeting day! … Thrones and purples, sumptuous robes of earthly honors, togas of the failing human justice, parliaments and decrees deemed irrevocable! … In silence, Lord, you saw the confusion that had been established among the restless people, and with the same devoted love, you always saved them at the painful moment of supreme devastation … With your merciful and immaculate hand stretched toward the humblest and most fragile peoples, you have confounded the false erudition of all times, humbling those who considered themselves great and powerful!

"Under your compassionate gaze, death has opened its doors of darkness and the false glories of the world have been torn down in the whirlwind of ambition, reducing all vanity to a heap of ashes!

"Before my soul arise reminiscences of elegant buildings with their famous columns; I see the Tiber flowing by, collecting the rubble of the great imperial Babylon; the aqueducts, the precious marble, the baths that seem indestructible … I also see the busy streets, where miserable plebs hope for the generosity of the great lords, the alms of wheat, the tattered cloth to protect the nakedness of the flesh from the cold.

"The Roman circuses are swarming … An aristocracy of patricians watches the elegant games on the Field of Mars, and everywhere, from the most humble streets to the most sumptuous palaces, there is talk of Caesar Augustus!

"Within these memories, Lord, I see myself, amid rags and splendors, bearing my miserable pride! From the dense veil of my darkness, I could not see you up above, where you keep your throne of inexhaustible grace.

"While the great Empire came undone in its tumultuous battles, you kept your heart in silence, and like the others, I did not perceive that you were watching!

"You allowed the Roman Babel to rise to the heights, but when you saw that it threatened the very stability of life on the planet, you said, 'Enough! The time has come to work in the field of the Truth!' And the great monuments with their statues of ancient gods fell from their imposing pedestals! A breath of death swept the regions infested with ambition and unrestrained selfishness, depopulating the great metropolis of dissipation. The daunting circuses collapsed, the palaces fell to the ground, the luxurious marbles darkened.

"One word from you was enough, O Lord, for the great lords to return to the banks of the Tiber as impoverished slaves![4] *... Thus, we roamed within the darkness of night until the day in which a new light broke forth in our consciousness. Centuries had to pass until we could learn the first letters of your infinite knowledge, of forgiveness and love!*

"And here we are, Lord Jesus, to praise your greatness! Grant that we may remember you at every step; that we may hear your voice in every sound along the path so that we may avoid the dolorous darkness! ... Reach out your hands towards us and tell us more of your Kingdom! ... We are deeply thirsty for that eternal water of life, which you portrayed in the teaching to the Samaritan woman.

"An army of workers for your Gospel, we move under your gentle and sacrosanct command! Help us, Lord, and do not remove the luminous and redemptive cross from our shoulders, but help us to feel in our daily work the eternal and immense light of your Kingdom of peace, harmony and wisdom on our pathway of struggle, solidarity and hope!"

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[4] After his life as the powerful senator Publius Lentulus narrated in this book, Emmanuel reincarnates as a slave by the name Nestorius, whose story he tells in "50 Years Later." – Tr.

Last February 8, the day before the receiving of this book came to an end, Emmanuel gave thanks for the assistance of his incarnate collaborators in a familiar communication, from which we single out a few sentences:

"My friends, may God help and reward you. Our humble endeavor is about to be finished. Only a few pages remain and I thank you with all my heart.

"Reencountering friends from a dead era, my heart is happy and comforted at seeing the dedication of all to the firm thought of evolving ahead and upward, for it is not without reason that today we labor in the same workshop of effort and goodwill.

"Jesus shall reward the share of friendly and sincere effort you have lent me, and my continuous prayer is that you may be blessed with his infinite mercy."

These are a few private notes by Emmanuel, furnished during the writing of this book. The humility of this kind spirit demonstrates that on the invisible plane there is also a need for personal effort, patience and faith for the accomplishment of any endeavor.

The author's personal notes are an invitation for us to be able to pray, work and hope in Jesus Christ, without discouragement in the trials the divine goodness offers us for our deliverance on the path of redemption.

Pedro Leopoldo, March 2, 1939.
The Publisher

PART ONE

I
Two Friends

The last rays of the afternoon had just begun to fall over the Roman cityscape.

The waters of the Tiber bordering Aventinus[5] mirrored the final reflections of twilight, while litters borne by brawny, swift slaves hurried along the narrow streets.

Heavy clouds were building in the sky, announcing impending rain showers, and the last of the windows of the private houses and public buildings were slammed shut at the first gusts of the evening.

Amid the elegant and sober buildings displaying their costly marble at the foot of the hill, there was one in particular that grabbed the attention of foreigners due to the uniqueness of its stern, majestic columns. Its artistic and imposing exterior indicated at a glance the social status of its owner.

[5] One of the Seven Hills of ancient Rome. – Tr.

It was the residence of the still-young Senator Publius Cornelius Lentulus, who, in the manner of that era, carried out legislative and judicial functions in the senate, in accordance with the rights to which he was entitled as a descendent of an ancient family of senators and consuls of the Republic.

The Empire, founded with Augustus, had limited the senatorial powers, whose holders no longer exerted any direct influence on the private matters of the imperial government, but it had maintained the hereditary succession of the ranks and titles of the patrician families, establishing clear cut lines of separation between classes in the social hierarchy.

It was 7:00 p.m. one evening in May in the year 31 A.D. Publius Lentulus, in the company of his friend Flaminius Severus, was reclining on the triclinium[6] finishing dinner while his wife Livia gave orders to a young Etruscan slave woman.

The host, a relatively young man, appeared to be less than thirty years of age despite his proud and stern profile and his toga with its broad purple hem[7] that commanded a certain respect from those who came near him. In contrast, his friend, albeit dressed in the same senator's apparel, looked to be much older, with premature gray hair showing kindness and life experience.

Leaving the young woman in the care of the household chores, both men headed for the peristyle[8] to catch a breath of fresh air on that stifling evening, in spite of the threatening sky foretelling imminent rain.

"Truth is, my dear Publius," declared a pensive Flaminius, "you are consumed with worry. This situation must change

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[6] A couch extending around three sides of a table used by the ancient Romans for reclining at meals. *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary.* – Tr.

[7] The toga could be worn only by free Roman citizens. Foreigners, or even exiled citizens, could not appear in public wearing a toga. The purple stripe of a senator's toga praetexta ran along the straight edge. http://www.roman-empire.net/society/soc-dress.html. – Tr.

[8] A columned porch or open colonnade surrounding a courtyard. It was the center for leisure and may have contained a garden. – Tr.

without wasting any more time. Have you consulted all of the experts regarding your daughter's case?"

"Unfortunately," replied the patrician with grief, "I've tried everything possible. Just recently, my poor Livia took her to our home in Tibur[9] to distract her, and while there she saw one of the city's best physicians, who affirmed that there is no cure for her in our current science. The doctor didn't actually confirm the diagnosis, most probably because of his pity for the sick little girl and out of respect for our parental despair; but from what we can tell, we believe the Tiburian doctor thinks it's a case of leprosy."

"What an impertinent and absurd assumption!"

"As for as our ancestors, we are completely certain that it is not hereditary, but as you know, Rome is swarming with slaves from every part of the world carrying out their daily chores."

"So true," agreed Flaminius bitterly.

A shadow of dark foreboding appeared on the faces of the two friends as the first drops of rain began to satisfy the thirst of the blossoming rosebushes that decorated the graceful, bright columns.

"And little Plinius?" asked Publius, wanting to steer the conversation in a new direction.

"That one, as you well know, remains healthy and full of life. Calpurnia is bewildered sometimes in her efforts to satisfy the whims of his twelve incomplete years. At times, he is willful and rebellious, and disobeys old Parmenides, doing his calisthenics only when it suits him. Nonetheless, he has a real fondness for horses. Can you believe that, in a reckless moment typical of his age, he slipped past the watchful eye of his brother and competed in a practice chariot race held by a sports organization at the Field of Mars, and did very well? When I look at my two sons, I always remember your little Flavia Lentulia; you are fully

[9] Ancient Italian town now called Tivoli, app. 18.5 miles from Rome. – Tr.

aware of my plans for the future to solidify the bonds that bind our families together."

Publius listened to his friend in silence, as if envy pierced his tender paternal heart.

"Nonetheless," he replied, "in spite of our plans, the omens do not favor our hopes; the truth is that, even with all our care, my poor daughter seems more like one of those unfortunate little creatures that are flung into the Velabrum[10]."

"We must trust in the magnanimity of the gods."

"The gods?" repeated Publius, hardly disguising his frustration. "As for that imponderable recourse, I have contrived a thousand theories in my feverish mind. Some time ago, when visiting your home, I had the opportunity to get to know your old Greek freed slave more closely. Parmenides told me about his youth and time in India, and the Hindu beliefs with their mysterious matters of the soul. Do you believe that after death we can return to the theater of life in other bodies?"

"Absolutely not," Flaminius replied adamantly. "Despite his good character, Parmenides takes his spiritual digressions a bit too far."

"Nonetheless, my friend, I'm beginning to think that he might be right. How can we explain the differences of fate in this world? Why the opulence of our aristocratic neighborhoods and the poverty of Esquilinus[11]? Faith in the power of the gods can't explain these torturous problems. Seeing my unfortunate little girl with her lacerated and rotting flesh, I think that your slave might be speaking the truth. What could little Flavia have done in her seven incomplete years to deserve such a horrible punishment from the heavenly potentates? What joy could our divinities find in the sobbing of a child and the tears of sorrow that sear our souls? Wouldn't it be more

[10] A neighborhood of ancient Rome that was located on top of a bog. – Emmanuel
[11] Another of the Seven Hills of Rome. – Tr.

understandable and acceptable to believe that we have come from afar with our debts owed to the powers of Heaven?"

Flaminius Severus shook his head like someone who wanted to get rid of a doubt, and returning to his normal stance, he replied firmly:

"You mustn't give room in your heart to such speculations. In all my forty-five years, I've never known any beliefs more cherished than ours in the venerable worship of our ancestors. You must understand that the diversity of social positions is a problem with its roots in our political regimentation, the only one that has established a clear division between the worth and efforts of each individual. As for the question of suffering, we must remember that the gods can test our moral virtues with the greatest threats to the fortitude of our spirit, without our having to adopt the absurd principles of the Egyptians and Greeks – principles, mind you, that have reduced them to annihilation and captivity. Have you offered any sacrifices in the temple after harboring such troubling doubts?"

"I've sacrificed to the gods according to our customs," replied Publius contritely, "and no one takes pride in the glorious virtues of our family traditions more than I. But my remarks are not only in relation to my daughter. I've been distressed for several days now by the frightful enigma of a dream."

"A dream? How can such a fantasy shake the fiber of a patrician?"

Publius Lentulus heard the question immersed in a deep reverie. His motionless eyes appeared to be taking in a landscape lost in time over the course of the years.

The rain, now a downpour, fell continuously, causing the impluvium[12] to overflow into the pool gracing the courtyard of the peristyle.

[12] The sunken part of the atrium in a Roman house. – Tr.

The two friends retreated to a broad marble bench and reclined on the oriental-style cushions that lined it, continuing their amicable conversation.

"There are dreams," Publius continued, "that differ from mere fantasy because their reality is just too irrefutable.

"I was returning from a meeting at the Senate, where we had discussed a problem of profound moral sensitivity, when I felt overcome by unexplainable exhaustion.

"I turned in early, and when I saw next to me the image of Themis[13] on our domestic altar as I pondered the particular duties of those who exercise the functions of justice, I felt that an extraordinary force was sealing shut my tired and hurting eyelids. However, what I was seeing were other places, recognizing in them landscapes that were familiar to my spirit, but which I had completely forgotten.

"Reality or dream, I couldn't say, but I saw myself wearing the insignias of a consul during the time of the Republic. It seemed as if I had gone back to the time of Lucius Sergius Catilina[14], because I saw him right next to me, along with Cicero[15]: two men, two personifications, one evil and one good. I felt connected to the former by strong and unbreakable bonds, as if I were living during the dark time of his conspiracy against the Senate, participating with him in the shameful plot to strike at the innermost organization of the Republic. I lent him support in his criminal intentions,

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[13] In Greek religion, the personification of justice, the goddess of wisdom and good counsel. http://www.britannica.com – Tr.

[14] Lucius Sergius Catilina; c. 108 BC- 62 BC; in the late Roman Republic, an aristocrat who turned demagogue and made an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the republic while Cicero was a consul. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

[15] Marcus Tullius Cicero; 106 BC-43 BC; Roman statesman, lawyer, scholar, and writer who tried unsuccessfully to uphold republican principles in the final civil wars that destroyed the republic of Rome. His writings include books of rhetoric, orations, philosophical and political treatises, and letters. He is remembered in modern times as the greatest Roman orator and innovator of what became known as Ciceronian rhetoric. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

adhering to his plans with my administrative authority as I headed secret meetings, where I decreed heinous murders … In a flash, I relived the entire tragedy, feeling my hands tainted with the blood and tears of innocent victims. As if I had involuntarily gone back to a dark and dolorous past, I was terrified as I contemplated the web of infamies perpetrated during the revolution that, luckily, was crushed by Cicero's influence. And the most terrifying thing was that I had assumed one of the most important and salient roles in the ignominy … All the revolting scenes of that time then rolled out before my amazed eyes …

"However, what humiliated me the most in those visions of my guilty past – as if my current personality were ashamed of such reminiscences – is that I had availed myself of my authority and power to take advantage of the situation in order to exercise the most acerbic vengeance against personal enemies, whom I ordered imprisoned under the most terrible accusations. And it was not enough for my merciless heart to round up my enemies and put them in hideous dungeons, resulting in the separation from their dearest and most loved ones. I ordered the execution of many in the darkness of the night, escalating it to the point where I also ordered the eyes of many of my political adversaries to be gouged out in my presence as I watched their torments with the brutal coldness of cruel vendettas! … Woe to me, who spread desolation and misfortune among so many souls, because the day came when the cruel executioner himself was eliminated!

"After a whole series of scandals that took me away from the Consulate, I felt the end of my infamous and miserable acts before inflexible executioners who condemned me to the dreadful punishment of strangulation, where I experienced all the torments and anguish of death.

"The most interesting thing, however, is that I relived the indescribable instant of my passage through the dark waters of the

Acheron[16], when it seemed like I had descended to the shadowy places of Avernus[17], where not even the light of the gods can penetrate. The great multitude of my victims then surrounded my anguished and suffering soul, demanding justice and reparation and bursting out in screams and wailing that perished in the recesses of my heart.

"How long was I a prisoner of that inexpressible torture? I cannot say. I only remember glimpsing the heavenly figure of Livia, who, in the midst of that vortex of terror, held out to me her fulgent and loving hands.

"It seemed that my wife was familiar to me from the remotest of times, because I didn't hesitate an instant to grasp her gentle hands, which led me to a tribunal lined with strange and venerable figures. Respectable white hair crowned the serene countenances of those judges of Heaven, emissaries of the gods sent to judge the men of earth. The atmosphere was characterized by a strange lightness, filled with graceful light that revealed my most secret thoughts in front of all those present.

"Livia must have been my tutelary spirit[18] in that council of intangible magistrates, because she held her right hand over my head as if imputing resignation and serenity on me as I prepared to listen to my sentence.

"I don't have to tell you about my fear and apprehension before that unknown tribunal, when the one who seemed to be the most authoritative figure spoke to me, declaring:

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[16] River that was thought in ancient times to go to Hades [house of Hades is a concept of Hell, a labyrinth of dark, cold, and joyless halls] because it flowed through dark gorges and went underground in several places; an oracle of the dead was located on its bank. In Greek mythology it is a river in Hades, and the name sometimes refers to the lower world generally. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

[17] In Roman mythology, a crater near Cumae in Campania which was believed to be the entrance to the underworld. Also a name for the underworld itself. http://www.pantheon.org. – Tr.

[18] Of all the forms of Roman worship, that which perhaps had the deepest hold was the worship of the tutelary spirits that presided in and over the household. http://ancienthistory.about.com. – Tr.

"'Publius Lentulus, in the justice of their mercy the gods hereby order your return to the whirlwind of earth's struggles so that, in redemptive tears, you may wash away the blemishes of your wrongs. You shall live during a time of marvelous spiritual splendor as you struggle through all sorts of situations and difficulties – notwithstanding the golden cradle that will receive you at birth – so that you may edify your tainted conscience in the suffering that purifies and regenerates!... Happy you shall be if you are able to benefit from the blessed opportunity of rehabilitation through selflessness and humility... It has been determined that you shall be rich and powerful so that at the right moment, through your detachment from earthly possessions, you may become a valuable element for your spirit mentors. You will be endowed with intelligence and health, fortune and authority as resources for your soul's integral regeneration, for the time will come in which you will be compelled to despise all riches and social status – if you are able to prepare your heart for the new pathway of love and humility, tolerance and forgiveness that will soon be established on the dark face of the earth!... Life is a game of circumstances into which every spirit must integrate the good as it shapes its destiny. Take advantage, therefore, of the opportunities the merciful gods are preparing for your redemption. Do not scorn the calling to the truth when the hour strikes for your testimony and sanctifying renunciation ... Livia will accompany you on the pain-filled road to perfection, and in her you will find a friendly and protecting arm in the days of harsh and bitter trials. Courage will be essential on the difficult pathway as you purify your faith and deeds in reparation of your criminal and dark past!'"

At this point the proud voice of the patrician became anguished and forlorn. Bitter emotions swelled up in his heart, pressed by uncontrollable despondency.

Flaminius Severus listened to him with interest and attention, searching for the best way to dispel his distress. He felt compelled to divert his stream of thought, to tear his spirit from that world of emotions inappropriate for his intellectual formation, appealing to his education and pride. But at the same time, he could not appease his own doubts in light of that dream, whose clarity and realness had left him bewildered. He knew that it was necessary to regain his own self-assurance first, and that to enlighten his friend – whom he regarded more as a brother – the logic of gentleness should shield his words.

Thus, laying a slender, white hand on his friend's shoulder, he asked kindly:

"And then, what did you see?"

Feeling like he was being understood, Publius Lentulus gathered new strength and continued:

"After that stern and venerable judge's exhortation, I no longer saw Livia beside me, but other gracious creatures clothed in peplos[19] that looked like translucent snow, comforting my soul with their welcoming and kindly smiles.

"Complying with their loving plea, I felt that my spirit was returning to the earth.

"I saw Rome, but it was no longer the city of my time; the old part was being restored under a new breath of beauty, for I saw new circuses, luxurious theaters, elegant thermal baths and enchanting palaces that I had never seen before.

"I had the opportunity to see my father-to-be among his papyri and parchments as he studied senatorial procedures exactly as we do today, and after beseeching the blessing of the gods on our home altar, I experienced a profound distress in the depths of

[19] A fancy shawl or upper garment worn by women in ancient Greece and Rome – Tr.

my soul. It seemed like I had been struck by an afflictive mental condition and I remained asleep in an indescribable vortex.

"I don't know how to describe what actually happened, but I awoke with a high fever, as if that thought digression through the worlds of Morpheus had brought an aching sensation of fatigue to my body.

"I don't know what you might think of this distressing and painful disclosure, but I would appreciate it if you could explain it to me."

"Explain it to you?!" exclaimed Flaminius, trying to impart a tone of forceful conviction to his voice. "You know very well how much respect the augurs[20] of the temple inspire in me, but after all, what you experienced was nothing more than a dream, and you know how much we ought to fear the imagination from our perspective as practical men. Because they dreamed too much, the illustrious Athenians became miserable slaves; so, for our part we must acknowledge the goodness of the gods because they have granted us the sense of reality necessary for our conquests and triumphs. Would it be right for you to renounce your self-respect and the position of your family based only on some fantasy?"

Publius allowed his friend to reason at length on the subject. After listening to his exhortations and advice, Publius then grasped his friend's hands and declared apprehensively:

"My friend, I would be unworthy of the magnanimity of the gods if I let myself be tossed about by events. A simple dream would not be enough to give rise to such ominous conjectures, but the truth is, I still haven't told you everything."

Flaminius Severus raised an eyebrow and asked:

"You still haven't told me everything? What do you mean?"

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[20] Augurs (divinatory personages) had a powerful influence on state religious beliefs and practices, especially in divination. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

A terrible doubt had been implanted in his generous soul by the detailed account of that remarkable and upsetting dream, and it was only with great effort that his fraternal heart hid from his friend the disquieting emotions stirring inside.

Without a word, Publius took Flaminius's arm and led him to the gallery in the tablinum[23] located in a corner of the peristyle near the home altar, where the purest and holiest familial devotional rites were held.

With deep respect, the two friends entered the room where documents were stored.

Several parchments and papyri were laid out in rows in one corner, and the gallery housed a large number of wax images of family ancestors and their lineage.

Publius Lentulus's eyes were teary and his voice quivered as if dominated by deep emotions. Approaching a particular wax image among the many displayed, he called Flaminius's attention to it with a brief question:

"Do you recognize this one?"

"Yes," his friend answered, shaken, "I do recognize it. It's Publius Lentulus Sura, your paternal great grandfather. He was strangled nearly a century ago for his role in the Cataline Conspiracy.

"It was exactly 94 years ago that my grandfather's father was put to death during those dreadful events," Publius declared emphatically, as if in total possession of the truth. "Look closely at the features of this figure and you will see the perfect similarity between me and that distant ancestor. Mightn't this be the key to my disturbing dream?"

The noble patrician saw the noticeable likeness of the facial features of the dead ancestor and those of his friend. His

[23] Located between the atrium and peristyle was the tablinum, an open living room that could be curtained off from public view. A hallway, or fauces, was positioned to one side of the tablinum to provide convenient access to the peristyle. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

perplexity reached its peak in light of that undeniable display. He was about to rationalize it through bloodline and hereditary, but Publius, as if guessing the minutest details of his doubts, anticipated his deduction:

"I too had all the doubts that are going through your mind. I struggled against all reason before I could accept the theory of our conversation here tonight. Even the closest similarity is both natural and possible; even so, that doesn't explain everything to my liking. A few days ago, I sent one of our servants to Tauromenium.[22] We own an old house there, where my great grandfather's documents were kept, and I had them brought here."

Moving like someone absolutely certain of his findings, he nervously leafed through several documents, stating:

"Just look at these papyri! They are my great grandfather's notes regarding his plans in the Consulate. In this pile of parchments, I found several entries of death sentences, which I had also seen during the course of the baffling dream … Look at this handwriting! Isn't it exactly like mine? What else do we need besides this proof of penmanship? For many days now I have lived with this dreadful dilemma in my heart… Could I be Publius Lentulus Sura reincarnated?"

Flaminius Severus hung his head, obviously troubled and distressed.

Publius Lentulus's lucidity and logic were unquestionable, and it seemed that any reasoning to the contrary would cave in thunderously in light of the facts. Nevertheless, he, Flaminius, would use all his efforts to salvage the patrimony of beliefs and traditions of his forebears while trying to bring clarification to his friend of so many years.

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[22] Town on eastern Sicily, Italy, currently called Taormina. – Tr.

"My friend," he said quietly, "I agree with you in light of these bewildering events; they would stir the coolest mind, but we mustn't risk our responsibilities based on the uncertainty of our first impressions. However real it might seem, there are other, more immediate and pressing realities awaiting our attention. Considering your thoughts, even if we believed in the truthfulness of the phenomenon, I still don't think we should delve too deeply into such mysterious and transcendent matters. Obviously, because of my practicality and life experiences, I'm not inclined towards such speculations. Even though I may agree overall with your point of view, I would suggest that you not extend it beyond our friendship, because despite the lucidity with which you have discussed these points with me, I sense that you are tired and shaken by the whirlwind of your social and home environment."

He paused, as if trying to find an effective way to mitigate the situation, and then gently suggested:

"You and your family should take a break for a while in Palestine. It has a lovely climate, which might help heal your little girl while restoring your own energies. Who knows? You might forget all about the tumult of the city and return to us afterwards with renewed strength. The current Procurator[23] of Judea is our friend. We could combine our interest and duties, since it would not be difficult for me to get a dispensation from the Emperor to relieve you of your responsibilities in the Senate, but in such a way that you would continue to receive your state salary while you stayed in Judea. What do you think? You could leave with your mind at ease because I would take care of all your business in Rome and look after your private interests and properties."

[23] Government financial agent in ancient Rome. From the reign of the emperor Augustus (27 BC–A.D. 14), procurators were regularly appointed to official posts in the imperial administration of the provinces or in the departments of the imperial government concerning such matters as the grain supply, the mint, and the mines. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

Publius displayed a ray of hope in his eyes, and as if he had examined all the pros and cons of the plan, he stated:

"Your idea is opportune and generous, but Livia's condition doesn't allow me to make a quick and definite decision."

"Why not?"

"We will soon be adding a second offspring to our home."

"And when might that be?"

"In about six months."

"Would you be interested in making the trip after this coming winter?"

"Yes, I would."

"Well then, you shall be in Judea exactly one year from now."

The two friends realized that their conversation had gone on for quite a while. The downpour had stopped and the firmament now glittered with washed and clean constellations.

The noisy cart traffic had begun with the disagreeable shouting of the drivers since in imperial Rome the daylight hours were reserved entirely for pedestrians and patrician litters.

Flaminius said an emotional goodbye to his friend and got into his luxurious litter with the help of his fleet-footed, Herculean slaves.

As soon as he found himself alone again, Publius Lentulus went onto the terrace, where the nighttime breezes were blowing swiftly by.

The Roman homeowner contemplated the profusely moonlit houses and buildings scattered amongst the sacred hills of the glorious city. He stretched out his gaze on the nocturnal landscape, considered the profound problems of life and the soul, and sadly hung his head. An irrepressible sadness took over his willful and sensitive spirit, and only a wave of pride held back the inner tears of his heart, tormented by anguishing thoughts.

II
A Slave

From the early days of the Empire, the Roman woman had given in to dissipation and excessive luxury to the detriment of the sacred obligations of home and family.

The easy acquisition of slaves to do the hardest jobs, as well as the most important responsibilities of home life such as education and instruction, had set in motion a great moral downfall in the stability of patrician families. Combined with idleness, the availability of luxury products from the East had weakened the integrity of Roman matrons, leading them into the frivolousness of fashion and romantic intrigues. This, in turn, had given rise to a complete breakdown of the family structure, leaving behind its most valuable traditions.

Nevertheless, a few households had heroically resisted this invasion of perverting and criminal tendencies.

Some women at the time still took pride in the tradition of ancient family virtues, of those who had preceded them

in the building of the generations of so many sensible and noble souls.

The wives of Publius and Flaminius belonged to this group. Intelligent and commendable, both shunned the corrupting customs of the age, representing two symbols of common sense and simplicity.

The last vestiges of winter of the year 32 A.D. had disappeared, pouring on the vernal and joyful land an immense goblet of flowers and scents.

On a bright, sunny day, we find Livia and Calpurnia in Livia's home engaging in friendly conversation while two little boys are drawing pictures in a corner of the room.

The two women are organizing travel clothes, mending some woolens and exchanging private thoughts in a low and friendly tone of voice.

At one point, the two boys wander off toward one of the adjoining rooms. Livia asks her friend:

"Don't your kids have their usual classes today?"

"No, my dear Livia," Calpurnia responded tactfully, guessing what her friend was driving at, "both Plinius and Agrippa have dedicated the day to your little girl. I can understand your hesitation and motherly scruples regarding the well-being of our kids, but your fears are unfounded..."

"Even so, the gods know what I've been going through ever since I heard the honest and sincere opinion of the doctor in Tibur. You well know that, as far as he is concerned, my daughter's case is terminal; there's no hope of a cure. Since then, my whole life has been a series of worries and torment. I've taken every precaution to isolate her from the circle of our relationships, attending to the essentials of hygiene and the need to employ all our efforts to contain the horrible disease."

"Who says the disease is incurable? Has this opinion come from the unfailing word of the gods? Don't you know how wrong human opinion can be?

"Some time ago, both of my boys came down with dangerous and life-threatening fevers. We called the doctors and I watched as they took turns doing everything they could to save them, without any noticeable results. Then, it occurred to me to seek the providence of heaven and I hurried to offer a sacrifice in the temple of Castor and Pollux[24], thus saving them from certain death. Thanks to such measures, today they are smiling and happy.

"Now that you have not only little Flavia but little Marcus, I would advise you to do the same and resort to the twin gods."

"All right, my dear Calpurnia. I shall do so before our departure."

"Speaking of your trip, how do you feel about this unexpected change?"

"You know that I'd do anything for Publius's peace of mind and the good of our home. For a long time now, I've seen that Publius is weary and ill because of his exhaustive work on behalf of the state. From being jovial and enthusiastic, he's become reserved and irritable. He gets upset at everything, and I think it's unquestionable that our daughter's precarious health is contributing to his gloom and bad mood.

"For these reasons, I will happily go with him to Palestine, although having to be away from your friendship and advice, even if it is just temporary, makes my heart heavy."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, because it is up to us to be aware of what is going on with the lifelong companions our hearts have chosen, and find ways to soften their plights.

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[24] In Greek and Roman mythology, twin deities who succored shipwrecked sailors and received sacrifices for favorable winds. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

"Publius is a good soul, generous and idealistic, but as a patrician descended from one of the most illustrious families of the Republic, he's extremely proud. Men like that require a lot of psychological good sense from their wives. Just make sure you maintain your poise in order to lead him along the best path.

"Flaminius gave me a general idea of your stay in Judea, but there are still some details I'm not sure about. Are you actually going to live in Jerusalem?"

"Yes. Publius wants us to move into his uncle Salvius's house in Jerusalem until we can find the best climate in the country in order to benefit our daughter's health."

"Indeed," said Calpurnia, appearing more discreet, "but in light of your inexperience, I feel I must enlighten you, especially considering the possibility of any future complications."

Livia was surprised by her friend's remark. All ears, she asked worriedly:

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm sure you don't know much about your husband's relatives, who have been away from Rome for so long," stated Calpurnia with the meticulous observations of the female mind, "and it's my duty as your friend to tell you not to be overly trusting where you're going.

"Several years ago Praetor Salvius Lentulus was stripped of his governorship of the provinces and is now merely an employee of the current procurator of Judea. He's not exactly the same sort of man as your husband, who, despite certain hereditary flaws, is very honest and sincere. You were still quite young when awful things happened in our social circles because of the individuals with whom you're going to live. Salvius's wife, who must still be a young and well-groomed woman, is the sister of Claudia, Pilate's wife, and Pilate is the person your husband has been recommended to for a top post in the administration of the province.

"You're going to meet all these people in Jerusalem. Their habits are much different than ours, and you must understand that you're going to be living among hypocritical and dangerous creatures.

"We don't have the right to criticize anyone's actions unless we are face to face with those we consider guilty or worthy of reproach, but I must warn you that the Emperor was compelled to assign these people to foreign posts due to serious family matters within the palace circles.

"May the gods forgive me for talking behind their backs, but it's just that because of your status as a Roman and the wife of a young senator, you will be flattered by our distant compatriots, flattery that will come your way in social circles like bouquets of sweet-scented roses, but also full of thorns."

Livia was surprised and concerned as she listened to her friend, declaring in a low voice as if she wished to clarify a doubt:

"But isn't Praetor Salvius an old man?"

"Not at all. He's just a little younger than Flaminius, but his refined manners lend him a lordly appearance."

"How will I be able to perform my duties successfully, in case I'm surrounded with the social perfidy so common in our time, without worsening my husband's spiritual state?"

"We must trust in the providence of the gods," uttered Calpurnia, displaying the magnificent faith of her maternal heart.

They were not able to continue their conversation. A loud noise announced the arrival of Publius and Flaminius, who came through the atrium looking for them.

"Well?" Flaminius exclaimed in a good mood, appearing at the door with a mischievous smile. "Between the needlework and the conversation, someone's reputation in this room is bound to suffer. As my father used to say: 'When a woman's alone, she's always thinking about her family; but when she's with someone else, she soon thinks about … others.'"

Everyone laughed heartily at his joyful words, and Publius exclaimed happily:

"We can relax, my dear Livia, because everything is ready according to our wishes. The Emperor generously volunteered to help us out with his direct orders, and in just three days a galley will be waiting for us near Ostia so that we can travel in peace."

Livia smiled, satisfied and comforted, as two laughing faces appeared from little Flavia's room: Flaminius opened his arms to embrace the two little ones simultaneously.

"Come here, you little rascals! Why did you skip out on your classes yesterday? I got a complaint today and I'm not too happy about it."

Plinius and Agrippa were downcast as they listened to the fatherly reprimand, and then the older responded meekly:

"But father, I'm not the one to blame. As you know, Plinius skipped out on the exercises and I had to go look for him."

"Shame on you, Agrippa," Flaminius said paternally. "You're old enough to know that you shouldn't take part in your brother's mischief."

At this point Calpurnia intervened to calm things down:

"All right, all right; we'll have to resolve the matter at home. Now's not the time for arguments between father and sons."

Both boys went to kiss their mother's hand as if to thank her for her loving intervention, and in a few minutes the two families said goodbye, with Flaminius promising that on the day they were to leave he would accompany his friends to Ostia, near the mouth of the Tiber River.

After seventy-two hours of hustle and bustle, we find our characters on a comfortable and elegant galley on the waters of Ostia, where no port had yet been built, a project later undertaken by Claudius.

Plinius and Agrippa helped accommodate the little sick girl in the ship's quarters at the suggestion of their parents, who were preparing them early on for the intricacies of social life. In the meantime, Calpurnia and Livia gave instructions to a servant about settling little Marcus in. A little ways off, Publius and Flaminius were talking, with Flaminius confidentially suggesting to his friend:

"You know that the subjects conquered by the Empire often regard us with envy and spite, but we must remain worthy of our position as patricians.

"I myself know that some regions of Palestine are infested with outlaws and you must be on the lookout for them, especially as you head toward Jerusalem. As soon as you make port, take with you as many slaves as you need for your own and your family's safety, and in case you are attacked, don't hesitate to punish strictly and severely."

Publius listened to the advice attentively and in a few minutes they both went inside the ship, where Publius asked the person in charge:

"Well, Aulus, is everything set?"

"Yes, your Excellency. We are only waiting for your orders to set sail. You need not worry about anything, because I have personally hand-picked the best Carthaginians as oarsmen."

They began saying their final goodbyes. The two women embraced each other, their eyes filled with loving and tender tears, with promises to remember each other always and to pray to the gods for everyone's tranquility.

After the families' final emotional embraces, the spacious galley weighed anchor with the flag of the Roman eagle waving proudly in the gentle breeze of the sea. The winds and the gods were favorable, because, at the Herculean effort of the slaves rowing in rhythm at the powerful oars, it was not long before the travelers, as

if advancing in the liquid mass toward the unfathomable vastness of the Infinite, could see far in the distance the green strip of the Italian coastline they were leaving behind.

The voyage was going as serene and calm as could be.

Publius Lentulus, however, had a heavy heart, despite the beauty and newness of the scenery as they crossed the Mediterranean, in such contrast with the monotony of his life in Rome and the countless affairs of the state. In vain his wife approached his irritable spirit in an attempt to address delicate family matters in order to discover and ease his inner concerns. He had the feeling that he was heading towards the turning point of the unraveling of his existence. He had visited part of Asia because as a younger man he had served a year in the Smyrna administration in order to better familiarize himself with the workings of the state. However, he had never been to Jerusalem, where he was being awaited as the Emperor's legate to help solve several administrative problems that he had been assigned to with the Palestinian government.

How would he find Uncle Salvius, who was much younger than his father? An uncle only a little older than Publius himself, he had not seen him personally for several years. And what about his frivolous and capricious wife Fulvia, who had married his uncle in the whirlwind of several social scandals, making her almost unwelcome within the family? Publius recalled other intimate details about the past, but refrained from conveying to Livia his dreadful expectations. By the same token, concerns for his wife and two children propelled him to anxiously consider the first obstacles they would encounter in Judea, not only because of their status as patricians but also as foreigners, considering that the relations awaiting them there were quite problematic.

Between his worries and his wife's prayers, the journey across the Mediterranean was coming to an end, when he instructed his personal slave:

"Comenius, we'll soon be at the gates of Jerusalem; but before that, we have a short journey on foot after we disembark. It will require special attention on my part regarding my family's transportation. A few representatives from the Judean administration will be waiting for us, but we will be relying on your watchfulness as we are about to cross a region that is completely unknown and foreign to me. Gather all the slaves under your orders so that we may guarantee our complete safety on this journey."

"Master, you can count on our carefulness and dedication," answered the servant respectfully.

The following day, Publius Lentulus and his company disembarked at a small port in Palestine without incident.

In addition to the procurator's legate, a few lictors[25] and several Praetorian soldiers were waiting for him. They were under the command of Sulpicius Tarquinius and were outfitted with all the equipment and personnel required for a peaceful and comfortable journey on the road to Jerusalem.

After a much-needed rest, the caravan set out, looking more like a military expedition than the simple moving of a family.

The horses' armor, the Roman helmets glistening in the sun, the extravagant attire, the decorated palanquins[26], the draft animals and the heavy baggage carts gave the bustling and silent expedition the air of a triumphal procession.

The caravan was proceeding nicely, when something unexpected occurred as they neared Jerusalem. A hissing object cut through the fine and clear air to become embedded in the

[25] Members of an ancient Roman class of magisterial attendants ... Lictors carried the fasces [insignia of official authority] for their magistrate and were constantly in his attendance in public; they cleared his way in crowds and summoned and punished offenders for him. They also served as their magistrate's house guard. In Rome the lictors wore togas; during a consul's triumph or while outside Rome, they wore scarlet coats. http://www.britannica.com. –Tr.

[26] A covered litter carried on poles on the shoulders of four or more bearers. –Tr.

senator's palanquin, and at the same time a shrill cry was heard. A tiny stone had lightly grazed Livia's face, to the great alarm of the huge cluster of slaves and horsemen. Amid the carts and animals that had stopped in alarm, several of the slaves surrounded their masters, hurriedly trying to determine what had happened. Sulpicius Tarquinius looked around and sped off on his horse to apprehend a frightened boy who was trying to escape off the side of the road. And guilty or not, a lad of about eighteen was brought to the travelers for punishment.

Publius recalled Flaminius's recommendation before their departure, and setting aside his better sentiments of tolerance and generosity, he decided to demonstrate his position and authority to all those who were to mind his stay in that foreign land.

He ordered immediate action from the lictors that accompanied him, and right there in the burning light of the noontime sun and in front of a few dozen startled slaves and several centurions, he demanded that the boy be mercilessly flogged for his imprudence.

The scene was unpleasant and painful.

All the servants watched in great distress as the whip snapped on the exposed back of the young man, who wailed in a flood of tears under the despotic and cruel flogging. No one dared object to the merciless order until Livia, no longer able to tolerate the cruelty of the scene, said to her husband in a pleading voice:

"That's enough, Publius. Our position does not give us the right to be merciless."

The senator came to his senses concerning his excessive severity and ordered an end to the dolorous punishment. However, in reply to Sulpicius's question as to the fate of the misfortunate youth, his voice came forth harsh and angry:

"To the galleys!"

Everybody trembled, because the galleys meant either death or slavery for life.

The unfortunate young man had gone limp and was being held up by the centurions who surrounded him; but upon hearing those three words of his condemning sentence, he fixed his eyes, filled with supreme hatred and spite, on his proud judge. At the core of his soul burned flames of vengeance and wrath; the caravan, however, proceeded amid the noise of the heavy carts and the clank of armor, as the high-spirited and restless horses moved them along.

Their arrival in Jerusalem occurred uneventfully.

The newness of the sights and the diversity of the people greatly impressed the travelers in their first contact with the city, whose appearance, with few changes over the centuries, remained always the same: sad and desolate, an entryway to the parched landscape of the desert.

Pilate and his wife attended the solemn reception of the senator, who, as Tiberius's legate in the province's administration, personified law and authority.

Salvius Lentulus and his wife Fulvia Procula received their relatives with pomp and lavishness. Countless honors were paid to Publius Lentulus and his wife. Livia, however, due to Calpurnia's advice or her own psychological acuity, understood that in that atmosphere she would not find the same sincere and generous hearts as her friends from Rome, leading her to feel a dolorous sensation of bitterness and anxiety in the depths of her soul. She was happy to see that her little Flavia had improved in spite of the exhausting trip, but at the same time she was distressed at perceiving that Fulvia was not generous enough to lodge them with caring and kindness. She noticed that when she introduced her ailing daughter, the vain patrician instinctively drew back, and afterwards had kept little Aurelia, the couple's

only child, away from any contact under all sorts of unacceptable excuses. One day in that foreign home was enough for the poor woman to glimpse the extent of the sorrows that awaited her there as she sized up the sacrifices the situation would demand from her sensitive and caring heart.

And it was not only the striking details of the family situation that tormented her mind, taxed with bitter expectations. The second she first saw Pontius Pilate, she sensed she had encountered a cruel and powerful enemy.

Unknown intuitive forces spoke to her soul as if voices from the invisible plane had begun preparing her spirit for the bitter trials that lay ahead. Indeed, in their spiritual aspect, women – symbols of the sanctuary of both home and family – can often interpret the impenetrable mysteries of characters and souls against the murky screen of successive and pain-filled reincarnations.

Publius Lentulus, on the other hand, did not experience the same emotions as his wife. The diversity of the environment had changed his disposition somewhat, and he felt morally comforted by his assignment as a statesman in this new setting.

On his second day in the city, as soon as he had returned from his first visit to the Tower of Antonia[27], where contingents of the Roman army were quartered to keep an eye on the casuists and doctors of the law at work in the famous Temple of Jerusalem, Publius was approached by a humble and relatively young man whose only credentials were the afflicted and loving heart of a father.

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[27] The Tower of Antonia was placed at the north-western angle of the Temple, midway between the castle of the same name and the Temple. Some of the most glorious traditions in Jewish history were connected with this castle. … But in the days of Christ, Antonia was occupied by a hated Roman garrison, which kept watch over Israel, even its sanctuary. In fact, the Tower of Antonia overlooked and commanded the Temple so that a detachment of soldiers could at any time rush down to quell a riot, as on the occasion when the Jews almost killed Paul (Acts 21:31). http://philologos.org. – Tr.

More attentive to the imperatives of a political nature than to the sentiments of a generous heart, the senator broke protocol and received the man in his private office.

The man was a Jew, a little older than Publius. In a very humble and respectful manner, expressing himself with great difficulty, he addressed Publius in these terms:

"Illustrious Senator, I am Andre, son of Gioras, a humble and very poor laborer, despite several members of my family having important positions in the Temple and in the practice of the Law. I would dare approach you on behalf of my son Saul, who was arrested three days ago at your orders and sent directly to lifelong slavery on the galleys... I would ask for your clemency and mercy to reduce his sentence, which will have a devastating effect on my poor home ... Saul is my firstborn and I have set all my fatherly hopes on him ... I know he is inexperienced in life and I have not come to claim his innocence, but to appeal to your clemency and magnanimity for his youthful misbehavior. I swear to you by the Law that from now on out I will guide him on the path of strictly fulfilled duties."

Publius recalled the need to establish his authority and replied with the pride characteristic of his decisions:

"How dare you dispute my orders when I am certain of having practiced justice? I cannot change my decisions, and I find it strange that a Jew would question the orders and words of a senator of the Empire by uttering complaints of this nature."

"But sir, I am a father..."

"If that is so, then why have you allowed your son to become a lazy good-for-nothing?"

"I cannot understand why my poor Saul did what he did, but I swear to you that he is my right hand in my daily work."

"It is too late to consider your feelings. I have made my decision and it is irrevocable."

Andre, son of Gioras, stared Publius Lentulus up and down, deeply struck as a father and as a man, flooded with grief and repressed rage. His moist eyes betrayed his despair in hearing that formal and unappealable refusal, but disregarding all human conventions, he spoke with unyielding pride:

"Senator, I lowered my dignity to beg for your compassion, but now I accept your merciless refusal!

"With the hardness of your heart you have just bought an eternal and implacable enemy! ... With your power and prerogatives you can do away with me forever, either reducing me to slavery or condemning me to die an infamous death, but I prefer to confront your proud arrogance! ... You have just planted a tree of thorns, whose fruit shall one day irrevocably embitter your hard and insensitive heart, for my vengeance may be slow in coming, but like your unbending and cold soul, it shall likewise be inflexible and dreadful!"

The Jew did not wait for Publius, emotionally shaken by the vehemence of those words, to respond. He left the room with firm steps and head held high as if he had obtained the best results from his short and decisive interview.

In a mixture of pride and anxiety, Publius's soul was overcome by a gamut of sentiments. He wished to order the immediate arrest of that man who had thrown the hardest truths in his face, yet, at the same time, he felt the desire to call him back and promise to restore his dear son to him, under the protection and prestige of his position as a statesman; but his voice stuck in his throat in the web of emotions that once again robbed him of his peace and serenity. A deep oppression paralyzed his vocal cords while in his anguished heart the man's fervent and bitter words continued to reverberate.

A series of heartrending thoughts passed through his mind in witness to his conflicting feelings. Was he not also a

father and did he not seek to hold his little ones close to his heart? That man had the strongest reasons to consider him an unjust and terrible person.

He remembered the inexplicable dream he had related to Flaminius and which was the indirect cause for his transfer to Judea; he also remembered his tears of contrition, arising from the turmoil of memories of his past life's crimes and misdeeds.

He left his office with a clear solution to the problem: he would order young Saul to be brought to him without any further delay in order to send him back to his father's house, thereby changing the sorrow he had inflicted upon poor Andre. His orders were carried out immediately; he was surprised, however, by the pertinent officials' report.

Young Saul had vanished from prison in what pointed to a desperate and unforeseen escape. This information was relayed to Publius Lentulus without him knowing that corrupt civil servants often sold young prisoners to ambitious slave traders who operated within the more populous sectors of the capital of the world.

When told that the prisoner had escaped, the senator felt his conscience relieved of the accusations that had weighed on it. After all, he thought, it was a case of lesser importance; upon escaping from prison, the boy would surely go back to his father's house. Consolidating his peace of mind, he sent orders to the security service not to look for the escapee, who would be granted clemency at an opportune time.

Saul's fate, however, was quite different.

In nearly all the Roman provinces, dreadful groups of thugs lived in the shadow of the state structure as unscrupulous traders of human beings.

The young Jew, with his youthful vigor and health, had fallen victim to these soulless creatures. Sold with others to

powerful Roman slave traders, he was put on a ship in the ancient port of Joppa and was bound for the capital of the Empire.

Moving ahead two months in our chronology of events, we find him on a large platform near the Forum, where men, women and children all together are lined up nearly naked with a small placard hanging from their necks. Eyes ablaze with revenge, Saul stood there semi-nude, a white woolen cap covering his head and his bare feet lightly dusted with gypsum.

In the midst of that cluster of unfortunate beings walked a man of ignoble and repulsive features, shouting in a raspy voice to the crowd of curious onlookers surrounding him:

"Citizens! Come take a look! … As you know, I am in no hurry to dispose of my merchandise, because I owe no one, but I am here to serve you, illustrious Romans!"

And pausing in front of this or that human merchandise to call the crowd's attention, he continued in his crude and insulting harangue:

"Look at this lad! … He is a superb example of health, thrift and submissiveness. He obeys at the first command. Take a good look at the strength of his flesh. Disease will never attack it.

"Look at this man! He speaks good Greek and is well made from head to toe!"

With this commercial pitch, he continued advertising each individual before the multitude of buyers who besieged him, until finally it was young Saul's turn. The young man reflected his rage and ferocious sentiments, despite his miserable appearance.

"Check out this lad! He has just arrived from Judea as the finest example of temperance and health, obedience and strength. He is one of the finest samples of today's lot. Look as his youthfulness, illustrious Romans! … I am offering him at the small price of 5,000 sesterces!"

The young slave stared at the trader, his heart boiling with hatred and the fiercest desires for revenge. A bustle of curiosity formed around this interesting and highly original figure, his Jewish features certainly making an impression on the square's crowd that morning.

One man stood out from the crowd and approached the trader, addressing him in a low voice:

"Flacus, my master needs a fine, strong boy for his son's bigas[28]. I think this youth will do. Will you sell him for 4,000 sesterces?"

"All right," agreed the other in a businesslike tone. "My interest, after all, is to serve my illustrious clientele."

The buyer was Valerius Brutus, head of the domestic services in the house of Flaminius Severus, who had put him in charge of buying a new slave with a good appearance, destined for the service of his sons' bigas on the grand days of Roman festivals.

Thus it happened that, filled with deplorable sentiments, Saul, son of Andre, was placed by the forces of destiny next to Plinius and Agrippa at the residence of the Severus family in the heart of Rome, at the paltry sum of 4,000 Sesterces.

[28] Two-horse chariots. – Tr.

III
In Pilate's Home

The aridity of the land on which Jerusalem is built gives the famous city a melancholy beauty touched by poignant monotony.

At the time of Christ, its appearance was almost the same as it is today. Only the hill of Mizpah[29], with its gentle and lovely traditions, offered foreigners a green and joyful view distinct from the overall arid and stark landscape.

We must note, however, that at the time Publius Lentulus and his family lived there, Jerusalem displayed the novelties and splendors of a new cycle. Herodian architecture[30] had

[29] Two locations have been identified as the site of Mizpah. One is present day Nebi Samwil, five miles north of Jerusalem. It is the highest hill in northern Judea at 2,942 feet. The other is the site of Tell en-Nasbeh, about eight miles north of Jerusalem. Evidence for each of these sites is credible and their heights would be compatible with the name Mizpah, which means "watchtower." http://www.ancientsandals.com/overviews/mizpah.htm. – Tr.

[30] Herodian architecture is a style of classical architecture characteristic of the numerous building projects undertaken during the reign (37 BC - 4 BC) of Herod the Great, the Roman client king of Judea. Herod undertook many colossal building projects. The most famous of these was his reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (ca. 19 BC). http://dic.academic.ru. – Tr.

sprung up in its environs, revealing Israel's new esthetic sense. The predilection for monoliths carved into living rock, so characteristic of ancient Israel, had been replaced by adaptations of the Jewish taste to Greek standards, thereby renovating the famous city's inner landscape. The jewel in the crown, however, was the Temple, which was completely new at the time of Jesus. Its reconstruction had been ordered by Herod in 21 A.D. It is worth noting that the gates alone took eight years to erect, considering further that the grandiose undertaking was accomplished gradually over time, to be finally concluded only shortly before its complete destruction.

The aristocracy of Israelite scholars met daily in its huge courtyards. It also housed the forum, the university, the tribunal, and the highest temple of an entire culture.

In addition to the deft theological discussions, civil procedures received their final decisions there, summing up all the ambitions and activities of a homeland in the powerful and grandiose temple.

The Romans respected the religious philosophy of foreign cultures and thus did not participate in the subtle arguments and sophisms debated and examined every day, but the Tower of Antonia, where the armed forces of the Empire were headquartered, controlled the area and facilitated the constant watch over all the comings and goings of the priests and popular masses.

After the incident involving the prisoner – which he continued to see as unimportant – Publius Lentulus had regained a certain measure of serenity to perform his customary duties. Jerusalem's arid landscape took on a new charm to his tired eyes: a place where his thoughts could rest from the numerous and intense hardships of Rome.

As for Livia, her heart remained focused on her distant affections, rather than the barren spirits in her new surroundings. As if by a miracle, little Flavia had improved, with a remarkable

change in the sores that covered her skin. Fulvia, however, with her hostile behavior toward Livia, whose charming simplicity and intelligence she could not tolerate, wasted no opportunity to make veiled, hurtful and cutting remarks, leaving Livia frustrated in a turmoil about what would come next. Her husband did not know about these incidents, because the poor woman refrained from showing him how unhappy she was.

Such episodes, however, were not the factors that contributed the most to her distress in that environment of difficult uncertainties.

It had been one week since they arrived in the city, and perhaps contrary to his customary habits, Pontius Pilate visited the praetor's home every day under the pretense that he enjoyed talking with the newly-arrived patricians. He would stay for hours on end, but warned by the secret intuition of her soul, Livia understood the governor's concealed thoughts toward her, and kept her spirit wary of his affable advances and veiled insinuations.

In those emotion-charged moments announcing a flood of passions, Fulvia's exasperation was also apparent, fueled by the venomous jealousy that Pilates' behavior was causing. Behind that magnificent setting of the artificial friendship with which they were welcomed, Publius and Livia would come to understand that there lay a bog of lower passions that was destined to sully the tranquility of their souls. They did not yet grasp the intricacies of the situation, however, and entered trustingly and naively onto the dark, dolorous pathway of trials that Jerusalem held in store for them.

In order to reaffirm his incessant courtesies, Pilate decided to host a dinner the whole family could enjoy, and where the fellowship and happiness would be perfect.

On the evening of the event, Salvius, Publius and their families arrived at the governor's mansion, where Claudia received them with a kind and welcoming smile.

Livia looked pale in her simple and unpretentious attire, and contrary to her husband's wishes, she had brought their sick little daughter along in the hopes that her motherly care would discourage Pilates' intentions, which her female soul discerned in her host's indiscreet and forward attitude that evening.

The dinner was served in high style, according to the strictest and most elegant customs of the Court.

Livia was perplexed with the formalities taking place under the highest refinement of Roman etiquette, a set of rules created in an environment that she and Calpurnia had always shunned in their simplicity of heart. A legion of slaves were coming and going in all directions – a veritable army of servers in comparison with such a small number of guests.

Once dinner was ready, the vocators made their entrance to recite the names of the guests, while the infertors brought in the dishes arranged with striking symmetry. The guests then reclined on the triclinium, lined with satiny down and flower petals. The various types of meats were brought in on gold plates and the breads in silver baskets. The number of servants kept increasing, including those who would sample the delicacies to certify their taste so that they could be served with the utmost confidence. Servers brought in a precious aged falernum[31], blended with aromas, and filled goblets set with precious stones; other servants followed them with silver cruets filled with warm or cold water to satisfy the guests' preferences. Next to the triclinium, where each guest was to recline languidly, stood young slaves, each with his particular function, dressed neatly and wearing graceful turbans with arms and legs semi-nude. Some waved long myrtle branches to keep off the flies, while

[31] Falernian (or Falernum), the most acclaimed wine of ancient Rome, was produced along the northern coast of the Campania region near Mondragone. http://www.epicurious.com/tools/winedictionary/entry?id=6389 – Tr.

others bent over the guests' feet, obliged to discreetly clean up the signs of their gluttony and overindulgence.

Fifteen different courses were served through the labors of dedicated and humble slaves. After the meal, the guests listened to pleasant music in halls glowing with hundreds of torches. Young, attractive servants performed passionate, sensual dances in homage to their masters, pleasing their lower instincts with their exotic, spontaneous art. The only reason a number of gladiators did not perform, according to the custom at the great banquets of the Court, was because Livia, with pleading eyes, had asked that the dreadful spectacle of human blood not take place at the feast.

The night was one of the hottest in Jerusalem; consequently, after dinner and the complementary ceremonies, the group of friends, now joined by Sulpicius Tarquinius, went out on the huge terrace, where young girl slaves performed delightful music of the East.

"I would never have imagined a patrician night like this one in Jerusalem," Publius remarked appreciatively to the governor with courteous respect. "I owe your magnanimous kindness the satisfaction of reliving the environment and unforgettable life of the Court, where expatriate Romans keep their heart and thought."

"Senator, this house is your house," replied Pilate familiarly. "I do not know if you will find my suggestion agreeable, but we would have reason to thank the gods if you would grant us the honor and happiness of welcoming you here with your noble family. It seems to me that Praetor Salvius's residence does not offer you the comfort you need, and in addition to the close kinship between my wife and your uncle's, I feel comfortable in making you this offering without infringing on our social customs."

"That would not do at all!" exclaimed the praetor, who had overheard the generous offer. "Fulvia and I are completely against such an arrangement." And nodding trustingly to his wife, "Isn't that right, dear?"

Fulvia, however, revealing a bit of exasperation, surprised everyone and retorted:

"I agree with it completely. Publius and Livia may be our guests, but we mustn't forget that the reason for their trip derives from the health of their little girl, the object of all our concerns at the moment. So we mustn't deprive them of anything that might be advantageous for our little patient."

And glancing instinctively at the marble bench where the girl was resting, she remarked to the surprise of everybody:

"Besides, the girl represents a serious worry to all of us. Her ulcerated skin reveals uncommon symptoms, similar to ..."

She was not able to complete the reason for her meticulous fears, because Claudia, a noble and dignified soul – the antithesis of the sister whom fate had given her – grasped the direction of Fulvia's thought and hurriedly objected:

"I see no grounds for such fears. I think little Flavia is much better and stronger, so much so that I believe Jerusalem's climate will bring forth her complete recovery."

And walking over to the little girl, as if to undo the hurtful impact of Fulvia's insensitive remarks, she took her in her arms, kissing her little face covered with the purplish hues of badly veiled sores.

Livia, her face on fire from Fulvia's humiliating words, received this kind gesture as a priceless balm for her motherly anguish. Publius, however, bitterly surprised, felt the need to reassert his calmness and manliness, concealing the distress the incident had caused him. Returning to the theme of the conversation, he expressed movingly:

"That's right, my friends. The health of my poor Flavia is the main reason for our long journey here. After resolving the immediate State-related problems that brought me to Jerusalem, for a few days now I have been exploring the possibility of moving somewhere farther inland so that my little girl can recover her precious health by breathing purer air."

"Well then," replied Pilate confidently, "I myself am quite knowledgeable in matters of climate, having been at this post for six years now. I have visited nearly every corner of the province and neighboring areas, and I can assure you that Galilee is the best. Whenever I have the chance to rest from my extensive responsibilities, I immediately head for our villa on the outskirts of Nazareth to enjoy the peaceful landscape and the delightful breezes coming off its huge lake. I agree that it is a long ways from here, but the fact of the matter is that if I stayed near the city at other retreats, I could not get away from the incessant requests of the temple rabbis, who are always busy with their countless squabbles. In fact, Sulpicius is about to leave to oversee some repairs on our residence since we plan to head there shortly to replenish our energies from the daily grind.

"Since you won't be needing my hospitality in Jerusalem, maybe we'll have the pleasure of welcoming you later at that villa?"

"My dear friend," replied the senator gratefully, "I must spare you the trouble, but I would be extremely grateful if your friend Sulpicius would arrange the acquisition of a modest, comfortable house and remodel it according to our family needs so that we could live there without concerns for a few months."

"I would be happy to."

"Very well," interrupted Claudia kindly, while Fulvia could barely hide her venomous spite, "I'll be in charge of getting our dear Livia accustomed to country life, where one feels so good in direct contact with nature."

"As long as you don't turn into Jewish women," joked the senator while everyone smiled happily.

At this point, upon being informed of the upcoming duties to be entrusted to him over the next several days, Sulpicius Tarquinius, a man trusted by the governor, felt free to join in the conversation, adding to everyone's surprise:

"Speaking of Nazareth, have you heard about its prophet?"

He was met with blank faces.

"Yes," he continued, "Nazareth now has a prophet who has been performing miracles."

"What are you talking about, Sulpicius?" asked Pilate sarcastically. "Don't you know by now that the Jews hatch new prophets every day?" Are the fights in the temple of Jerusalem about anything else? Each and every doctor of the Law considers himself inspired by Heaven and each one possesses a new revelation."

"But this one, Sir, is quite different."

"Have you perchance converted to a new faith?"

"Certainly not, especially because I understand the fanaticism and obstinacy of those wretched creatures: but I was really intrigued by this young Galilean when I passed through Capernaum a few days ago.

"In the middle of a square set up with makeshift seats of stone and sand, I saw a large crowd listening to his words, in quiet wonder and expectation.

"As if touched by some mysterious, invisible power, I too sat down to listen.

"From that figure's extraordinarily lovely simplicity emanated something that dominated the crowd, which became serene hearing his promises of an eternal kingdom ... His hair fluttered in the late afternoon breeze like threads of an unknown light, and his compassionate eyes seemed to exude infinite mercy and compassion. Barefoot and poor, his tunic

was noticeably immaculate, its whiteness blending with his delicate features. His words were like a song of hope for all the downtrodden of the world, and they hung between heaven and earth, renewing the thoughts of all who were listening … He spoke of our grandeur and conquests as being quite meaningless. He had harsh words for Herod's monumental endeavors in Sebaste[32], and he affirmed that above Caesar was an Almighty God, who provided for all the downcast and afflicted … In his teaching of humility and love, he regards all humans as brothers and sisters, children of this Father of mercy and justice, who is unbeknownst to us."

Sulpicius's voice was filled with the emotional tone characteristic of the sentiments that derive from the truth.

The room listened to him with great interest, caught up in his emotional description.

Pilate, however, prompted by his vanity as governor, interrupted him:

"All brothers! That's absurd. The doctrine of one, sole God is nothing new to us in this land of illiterates, but we cannot agree with this concept of unrestricted fraternity. What about the slaves? And the Empire's conquered peoples? Where do the prerogatives of the patrician class stand?

"What surprises me the most, however," he said emphatically, addressing the storyteller in particular, "is that even though you are a practical and decisive man, you allowed yourself to be carried away by the crazy words of this new prophet when you joined the crowd to hear him. Don't you

[32] Samaria (Sebaste): Herod the Great rebuilt the city and named it after the emperor (Augustus' name in Greek is Sebaste). Six hundred columns lined a half-mile street of Herodian Sebaste. The Roman forum was a large open area where people assembled for commerce and governmental activity. On the edge of the forum, archaeologists have excavated a Roman basilica. … Herod also built a large stadium on the northern slope of the city. http://www.bibleplaces.com. – Tr.

know that the acquiescence of a lictor can lend enormous prestige to the ideas of this man?"

"Sir," replied the disheartened Sulpicius, "I myself cannot explain the reason for my observations that afternoon. At first, I considered his teachings subversive and dangerous for making slaves equal to their masters, but then I noticed his miserable poverty, considered by his disciples and followers as a joyful and happy condition, something that does not constitute the least concern to the provincial authorities.

"Besides, his sermons do not interfere with the work of the peasantry and laborers, because he usually gives them during rest periods. It is also interesting that his favorite companions are among the humblest and least educated fishermen of the lake."

"But how could you have let yourself be so taken by this man?" retorted Pilate sternly.

"Well, that's not the case," answered the lictor, regaining his self-control. "I'm not as impressed as you might think. Even though I may have been struck by his simple and pleasant uniqueness, I do not recognize any supernatural gifts in him, and, in response to your concerns, I believe that the Empire's scholars can explain the incident I'm going to convey.

"I don't know if you know Coponius, the old distinguished centurion in Capernaum, but I must inform you of something I witnessed personally. Right after the voice of the prophet of Nazareth had left a gentle quietude on the landscape, Coponius brought his little boy to him, imploring the prophet's charity for the dying child. I saw the prophet raise his radiant eyes to heaven as if to beseech the blessing of our gods, and then I watched him place his hands on the boy, who seemed to experience a jolt of new life. He suddenly sat up, crying and looking for his father after gazing tenderly at the prophet."

"Is it possible that even centurions are starting to mix with the Jews and their nonsense? I need to talk to the Tiberias authorities about what is going on," stated the governor, visibly upset.

"A strange case," said Publius Lentulus, intrigued with the tale.

"The truth is, my friend," objected Pilate to the senator, "new religions arise every day around here. These people are a lot different than ours, especially when it comes to reasoning and common sense. A governor here cannot let himself be impressed by anyone in particular, but must adhere to strict principles in order to safeguard the inviolable sovereignty of the State. That is why, following the determinations of the seat of government, I do not get involved in isolated cases. I consider only the judgments of the priests of the Sanhedrin. They are the ones who represent the entity of legitimate power, and they can help us solve any problem of a political and social order."

Publius was satisfied with this argument, but, except for Fulvia, the women seemed deeply impressed with Sulpicius's story, including little Flavia, who had soaked up his words in her childish curiosity.

A veil of worries had darkened the festive mood, but the governor did not give in to it and exclaimed:

"I can't believe it! A lictor who, instead of raising our spirits, does just the opposite and dampens our happy celebration, deserves severe punishment for his ill-timed stories!"

Everyone laughed at this light and boisterous remark while Pilate concluded:

"Let's retire to the garden for some more music to unburden our hearts of such unexpected annoyances."

His suggestion was welcomed by everyone.

Claudia got little Flavia settled in a comfortable bedroom, and in a few minutes, to the sound of whimsical and lascivious

tunes, the guests split up into three distinct groups along the garden paths lit by bright torches.

Publius and Claudia talked about the scenery and nature; Pilate chatted with Livia, while Sulpicius joined Fulvia. Praetor Lentulus decided to stay in the gallery to examine some works of art.

Purposefully avoiding the other groups, the governor noticed Livia's paleness; she looked more seductive and beautiful than ever.

The respect that her subtle beauty inspired in his soul seemed to increase the ardor of his impassioned heart.

"Dear Livia," he said with great emotion, "I can no longer hide the feelings that your beauty-filled virtues inspire in me. I know that your noble soul will, of course, reject what I am saying, but it torments me that you don't understand my heart filled with this overpowering veneration!"

"I too," replied the poor woman with spontaneous dignity and strength, "am sorry that I have inspired such passion in you. Your words surprise me bitterly, not only because they come from a patrician vested with the lofty responsibilities of a procurator of the State, but also because my husband has devoted his trusting and noble friendship to you."

"But in matters of the heart," he interrupted solicitously, "formalities of political convention cannot prevail, no matter how lofty. I have a full understanding of my duties and I know how to solve all the problems relating to my position, but I cannot remember where I might have seen you before! ... The fact is that for a week now my heart has been aching and heavy ... At seeing you, it seemed that I had come face to face with an adored and unforgettable image. I did all I could to avoid this unpleasant situation, but I must confess that an invincible power confounds my heart!"

"You are mistaken, sir! Between us there can be no other tie than that inspired by the respect arising from our

social standing. If you hold your political obligations in such high esteem, you must not forget that the public man must cultivate the virtues of private life and work on the respect and incorruptibility of his own conscience."

"But you make me forget all those obligations. I wonder where I could have seen you before, to have become so enamored with you."

"In the name of the gods, that is enough!" gasped Livia, frightened and pale. "I never saw you before we came to Jerusalem, and I appeal to you as a gentleman to spare me such distressing references! … I have reason to believe that you are happily married to a good and dignified wife, and thus regard as madness the advances I infer from your words."

Pilate was about to continue, when the bitterly surprised woman felt herself about to collapse, trying in vain to gather her strength to avoid it.

Unusually drained, she leaned against one of the trees in the garden where the conversation was taking place. Fearing the consequences, the governor reached for her small delicate hand, tortured by unspeakable thoughts. At his touch, Livia reacted instinctively with unyielding firmness.

Recovering her strength, she bowed her head slightly in thanks as Publius and Claudia approached them. The conversation reverted to a general tone to everyone's satisfaction.

The scene caused by the governor's overflowing affection, however, was not limited only to the two actors who had played it so intensely.

Fulvia and Sulpicius had witnessed every detail through openings in the dark foliage.

"Well, well!" the lictor prodded Fulvia as they closely observed the dialogue that had just taken place. "So, you have fallen from the good graces of the procurator of Judea?"

At this question, Fulvia, who could not tear her eyes from the scene, shook convulsively, crushed by overwhelming jealousy and spite.

"You don't answer?" continued Sulpicius, relishing the situation. "Why do you continue to spurn me when I can offer you profound dedication and loyalty?"

Fulvia was burning with anger as she continued to look on quietly from her observation post, when she saw the governor holding Livia's lifeless hand in his, speaking words Fulvia could not hear, but which she guessed according to her lower sentiments, in that unexpected dialogue.

As soon as Claudia and Publius reentered the scene, Fulvia turned to her companion and whispered in a low voice:

"I'll grant all your desires if you'll help me with a plan."

"What plan?"

"At the right moment, we shall reveal to the senator his wife's unfaithfulness."

"But how?"

"First of all, you will stall Publius's move to Nazareth in order to make them move even farther away; that will complicate the relationship between the governor and Livia once she leaves Jerusalem, since I think she might be wanting to move to Nazareth in the upcoming days. Immediately afterwards, I will personally see that you are appointed to protect the Senator at his retreat, and after that you will direct the events for the success of our plans. That done, I will reward forever your efforts and good services with my complete devotion."

The lictor listened to the proposal in undecided silence. But as if she were anxious to seal the sinister alliance, Fulvia asked firmly:

"Can I count on you?"

"Totally!" Sulpicius answered, now resolute.

And the two personifications of spite and lechery rejoined the fraternal group, wearing masks of feigned joy after having sealed their sinister pact.

The final moments were devoted to farewells with the shallow affability of social conventions.

Livia refrained from telling her husband about the painful scene in the garden, in consideration not only due to his need for inner peace, but also due to the social prominence of the persons involved. She promised herself that she would avoid at all costs saying anything undignified that could cause a scandal.

IV
In Galilee

Early in the morning on the day after these events, Publius Lentulus received a visit from Fulvia in his private office. She addressed him wickedly in these terms:

"Senator, the social influence of our family connections has obliged me to inform you of an unpleasant and grievous matter. As a woman, I must advise you to guard your wife against the wiles of your friends, because just yesterday I happened to catch her having a rather intimate conversation with the governor."

Publius was taken aback by her odd and coarse approach, so contrary to his own character as a man of honor.

He vigorously rejected Fulvia's insinuation by recalling his wife's trustworthiness, which only prompted Fulvia to describe in minutest detail the scene of the previous night, extravagantly embellished by her sick imagination.

The senator became pensive, but had the indispensable moral courage to rebuff the slanderous allusions.

"Well," she said, finishing her accusation, "you are taking your trust and good faith too far. A man should never turn a deaf ear to a woman's counsels. The proof that Livia has taken the broad road of deceit will be made obvious soon enough. She is going to want to leave immediately for Nazareth, where the governor will seek to meet with her."

Having said that, she left in a rush, leaving the senator disheartened and dismayed, pondering the contemptible people who surrounded him. In his mind's judgment, he was not inclined to accept any idea that would defile the valorous dignity of his wife.

A thick veil of darkness covered his sensitive, loving heart. He felt like all the dark forces of his destiny were conspiring against him in Jerusalem, and he felt a vast desert in his soul.

In this city he would not find the prudent and generous words of a friend like Flaminius, to whom he could confide his deepest troubles.

Absorbed in these anguishing thoughts, he was unaware of the hours whirling incessantly in the eddies of time. Only much later did he hear the voice of one of his trusty servants who had come to tell him that Sulpicius Tarquinius was requesting a private meeting. Publius readily assented.

Once inside the office, the lictor went directly to the point of his visit and explained self-assuredly:

"Senator, I felt honored by your trust in the matter of your transfer to a calmer retreat, and I have come to suggest that you rent the lavish property of one of our countrymen. It is near Capernaum, a lovely town in Galilee on the road to Damascus. I know that you have already chosen Nazareth, but comfortable housing is hard to come by on the plains of Esdraelon. Also, you would be subject to huge expenditures for remodeling and improvements. In Capernaum, on the other

hand, the situation is different. I have a friend there, Caius Gratus, who has decided to rent his splendid villa indefinitely. It is an estate with large orchards and all sorts of comforts in a completely peaceful environment."

The senator listened to Pilate's envoy but his mind was drifting elsewhere; however, his attention suddenly awakened, he said as if talking to himself:

"It's seventy miles from Jerusalem to Nazareth … Where's Capernaum?"

"A long ways from Nazareth," responded the lictor, hiding his ulterior motives.

"Very well, Sulpicius," replied Publius, conveying that he had reached a decision, "I'm very grateful for your kindness, which I shall reward at the appropriate time. I accept your suggestion, which I think is sensible. In fact, I'm not at all interested in acquiring a permanent residence in Galilee because I plan to return to Rome in the very near future. You are authorized to finalize the deal. I will follow your advice, trusting your knowledge of the matter."

A hidden satisfaction appeared in Sulpicius's eyes as he left with feigned gratitude.

Publius Lentulus again rested his elbows on his desk, immersed in profound thought.

Sulpicius's suggestion had come just in time to ease his profound distress. In light of this new development, he would be able to settle his family far from any influence of Judea's procurator, thus saving his reputation from the disgraceful blemish of slander.

Fulvia's accusation, however, had unleashed a string of concerns in his soul. Whether by the unexpected calumny or perversity with which it was contrived, his thoughts were immersed in anxious expectations.

That evening after dinner we find Publius alone with Livia on the balcony of the residence of the praetor, who had left the house for a few hours with his family to attend to other demands.

Noticing the signs of his obvious annoyance, his wife spoke with the tenderness of her woman's heart:

"Darling, it worries me to see you like this, pressed under the burdens that upset you so much. This long journey is meant to restore us to the peace of mind you need so that you can carry out your assignment … I would go so far as to ask you to hasten our move from Jerusalem to a calmer environment where we can be more alone, away from this circle of people whose customs are not our own and whose sentiments are unknown to us. When will we be leaving for Nazareth?"

"Nazareth?" the senator repeated with an irritated, somber voice as if touched by a venomous jealousy as he unwillingly recalled Fulvia's unfounded accusations.

"Yes," Livia continued pleading with him tenderly. "Wasn't that what we agreed on yesterday?"

"Of course, darling!" Publius exclaimed ruefully, ignoring the bad thoughts that had assailed him for a moment. "But I have decided that we should settle in Capernaum, despite the previous arrangement."

And taking his wife's hand as if seeking solace for his aching soul, he said to her gently:

"Livia, you are all that I have in this world! … Our children are the flowers of your soul, whom the gods have given us for my joy! … Forgive me, my dear … I have been wrapped up in myself too long and have been neglecting your sensitive, loving heart! I feel like I'm just now awakening from a deep and dreadful dream, and am still filled with apprehension and sorrow. Deep down, I sense danger ahead … I'm afraid of losing you, even though I want to keep you close in my heart … Forgive me."

As she gazed at him in surprise, his eager lips covered her hands with ardent kisses. It was not only the affectionate kisses that burst forth in that flood of love – a tear dripped from his weary eyes, blending with the signs of his affection.

"What's wrong, Publius? Are you crying?" said Livia, both touched and troubled.

"Yes! I feel the spirits of evil surrounding my heart and my mind. Inside of me there are somber visions foretelling the end of our happiness. But I am a man and I am strong … Darling, please don't refuse me your hand so that we may go down life's pathways together, because with you I shall defeat the impossible itself!"

She was startled by these remarks so uncharacteristic of him.

In a flash, she went back to the previous night. She remembered the insolence of the governor, whom she had rebuffed. Although she now felt concern for her husband, she had the certainty of a clear conscience. Taking him gently by the hand, she led him to a corner of the balcony. She sat at an old melodious harp and began singing quietly, as if her voice that evening were the chirping of a wounded lark:

"Twin soul of my soul,
Flower of the light of my life,
Sublime star fallen
From the beauties of the firmament!
When I was wandering in the world,
Sad and alone on my pathway,
You appeared, very gently,
And filled my heart.

You came with the blessing of the gods
In the divine brightness

To weave my happiness
In smiles of splendor!
You are my infinite treasure;
I swear my eternal allegiance to you,
For I am your hope,
Just as you are all my love!"

It was a song that he had written in his youth, very much to the taste of adolescent Romans. He had dedicated it to her, and her musical talent had stored it for special occasions.

This time, however, her voice had different tonalities, as if a divine warbler had perched in her throat after having come all the way from the shining meadows of Heaven.

At the last note, touched with indefinable sadness and sorrow, Publius warmly held her close, strong and resolute, as if he wanted to hold his indescribably pure jewel to his heart forever.

This time it was Livia who wept copiously in the arms of her husband as he kissed her in the elation of his loyal, yet sometimes impulsive soul.

After that emotional rapture, Publius felt at peace and content.

"Why don't we go back to Rome as soon as possible?" Livia asked, as if her spirit was lit by a prophetic light regarding the days ahead. "We could resume our usual obligations with the children, knowing that struggle and suffering are to be found wherever one might go and that every instance of joy in this world means a blessing from the gods!"

The senator pondered his wife's suggestion, analyzing the entire situation in silence. Finally, he replied:

"Your suggestion is fair and providential, my dear, but what would our friends say if they knew that, after the sacrifice of having traveled so far, we decided to stay only one week? And our ailing little girl? Hasn't she responded favorably to the new

climate? Let's be confident and at peace. I shall expedite our departure to Capernaum, and just as we hoped, in only a few days we will be in new surroundings."

And thus it was.

Overcoming the pernicious environment, Publius Lentulus solved all the problems pertinent to the move, turning a deaf ear to Fulvia's insinuations, while Livia, shielding herself in the superiority of her soul, sought to isolate herself within the little world of love for her two little ones. She avoided the governor – who had not ceased his advances – and Claudia's noble presence awakened in everybody the most sincere sympathy.

Two additional slaves were taken on to help the couple with their move to Capernaum. They were not indispensable to the household activities, since a large number of servants had been brought from Rome, but the senator thought they would be useful due to the fact that he and his family would need a more direct contact with the local customs and dialects, and the two new slaves were familiar with Galilee.

Ana and Semele had been recommended by friends of the praetor, and were welcomed by Livia into her service with kindness and sympathy.

Preparations for the move took thirty days.

Encouraged by the advantages for his own material interests, Sulpicius Tarquinius did not waste the opportunity to win the senator's complete trust by readying the property with detailed attention and kindness, resulting in everyone's contentment and praises for him.

On the day before leaving, Publius Lentulus went to Pilate's office to thank him and bid him farewell.

After greeting him cordially, the governor exclaimed with forced joviality:

"My friend, it's unfortunate that circumstances are taking you to Capernaum, because I was hoping to have the pleasure of having you near our home in Nazareth.

"But when I'm in Galilee, instead of my usual visits to Tiberias, I shall head north to visit you instead."

Publius expressed his gratitude and appreciation, and as he was preparing to leave, the Judean procurator offered him some friendly advice:

"Senator, not merely because I am responsible for the situation of patricians in the province but because I am a true friend, I cannot allow you to depart at the mercy of chance in the company of only your personal slaves and servants. I have appointed Sulpicius, a man worthy of all my trust, to oversee your safety. In addition to him, another lictor and a few centurions will leave for Capernaum, where they shall be at your service."

Publius thanked him amiably, comforted by the offer, although the governor inspired little sympathy in him.

At last, the preparations for the trip were completed and the small caravan started out, passing through the region of Judah and the green mountains of Samaria on its way to its final destination.

A few days were spent on the road, which often skirted the light, limpid waters of the Jordan River.

About a quarter mile outside Capernaum, an opulent estate, set among leafy trees beside the Lake of Gennesaret[33], was waiting for our personages as their place of rest.

Sulpicius Tarquinius had overseen the smallest details according to the taste of the time.

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[33] Also called Sea of Galilee or Lake Tiberias. "Lake in Israel through which the Jordan River flows. ... Located 686 feet (209 m) below sea level, it has a surface area of 64 square miles (166 square km). The sea's maximum depth, which occurs in the northeast, is 157 feet (48 m). Measuring 13 miles (21 km) from north to south and 7 miles (11 km) from east to west, it is pear-shaped. http://www.britannica.com. Tr.

The property was situated on a small hill surrounded by the fruit trees of cooler climes, for two thousand years ago, Galilee, today a dusty desert, was a lush paradise. Flowers of all climates blossomed in its marvelous landscape. Its huge lake, formed by the crystalline waters of the river sacred to Christianity, perhaps contained the most fish of any in the world. Its gentle, lazy waves lapped at the feet of lush groves of trees, whose roots were touched with the fragrance of oleanders and wild flowers. Flocks of birds covered those prodigious sky-blue waters, nowadays situated between scorched, burning cliffs.

To the north, the snowy slopes of Mt. Hermon stood out in joyful, white relief, bordered on the west by the rising, sunlit plains of the Golan Heights and Perea, together forming a vast stretch of land to Caesarea Philippi in the south.

Lush, unique vegetation released a continual supply of the purest air, tempering the heat of the lake region, which was well below the level of the Mediterranean.

Publius and his wife felt a wave of new life as they filled their lungs with deep breaths of that fresh air.

The same was not true of little Flavia, however, whose health had worsened against all expectations.

The sores covering her ailing little body took a turn for the worse and the poor child could no longer leave her bed, where she lay in profound prostration.

With his paternal anguish intensified, Publius resorted in vain to every means to improve little Flavia's condition.

After a month in Capernaum, exposed more directly to the vernacular of the people, they had become aware of the deeds and preaching of Jesus.

Responding to a secret appeal of his heart, Publius often thought about going to this "miracle worker" in order to ask him to help his daughter. However, as he examined the possible

consequences, down deep he realized that such an approach would lower his political and social standing in the eyes of the plebs and vassals of the Empire.

Despite these considerations, he allowed several of his household slaves to listen on Saturdays to the preaching of the Nazarene prophet. These included Ana, who had a respectful veneration for the one whom the humble folk called Master.

The slaves wove the most enchanting tales about him, but the senator saw nothing more in them than the instinctive enthusiasm of the popular soul, even though the flattering opinion of a man like Sulpicius continued to puzzle him.

One afternoon, however, Flavia's suffering had reached its peak. Besides the sores that had multiplied over the years on her graceful little body, others had surfaced in areas of the formerly purplish epidermis, transforming her delicate organs into a living pustule.

Dismayed, Publius and Livia awaited her impending death.

That particular day, after a simple dinner, Sulpicius stayed late under the pretext of comforting the senator with his company.

Thus, we find both of them on the spacious terrace, where Publius is speaking to him in these terms:

"My friend, what do you think about these rumors regarding that prophet from Nazareth? Since I do not usually pay any attention to what unlearned folk say, I would like to hear once again your impressions about this extraordinary man."

"Oh, yes!" replied Sulpicius, seeming to make an effort to recall something about it. "Intrigued by the scene I witnessed a while back, and which I related at the governor's home, I've been trying to follow the activities of this man when time permits.

"A few of our countrymen consider him to be a visionary, an opinion that I share regarding his sermons, which are filled

with incomprehensible parables, but not regarding his deeds, which touch our hearts.

"The people of Capernaum are awed by his miracles and a community of dedicated disciples has formed around him, ready to follow him wherever he goes."

"But what does he teach the multitudes, after all?" asked Publius, very interested.

"He preaches a few principles that strike at our oldest traditions, for example, the doctrine of loving one's enemies and the absolute fraternity of all humankind. He exhorts his listeners to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, but he does not mean Jupiter, the lord of our own gods; on the contrary, he speaks of a merciful and compassionate Father, who watches us from Olympus and knows our innermost thoughts. At other times, the Nazarene prophet describes this kingdom of heaven with interesting and incomprehensible allegories, with kings and princes created by his dreamy imagination, but which could never have existed.

"But the worst thing," said Sulpicius, lending a grave tone to his words, "is that, with these principles of a new kingdom, this peculiar man appears in the minds of the people as a prince arisen to assert the prerogatives and rights of the Jews, whom he might want to lead some day."

"What measures have the Galilean authorities taken to examine such revolutionary ideas?" asked the senator, with greater interest.

"The first signs of reaction have already begun on the part of elements closely connected with Antipas[34]. A few days ago when I was in Tiberias, I noticed some currents of opinion wanting to take the matter to the consideration of the higher authorities."

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[34] Herod Antipas, son of Herod I the Great, became tetrarch of Galilee and ruled throughout Jesus of Nazareth's ministry." http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

"Well, it seems obvious," stated the senator, "that he is a simple man of the people, whom the fanaticism of the Jewish temples has endowed with unjustifiable claims. I don't think the administrative authorities have anything to fear from such a preacher, the master of a humble brotherhood unsuited to our current successful achievements. On the other hand, hearing about his deeds from your own lips, I sense that he might not be as simple as we think he is."

"Would you like to get to know him better?" Sulpicius asked eagerly.

"Not in the least," Publius responded, boasting superiority. "Such a move on my part would compromise my stature as a man of the State and would demean my authority before the people. Also, I think that the priests and preachers of Palestine should undergo a period of training and study in the seat of the imperial government in order to refurbish this spirit of prophecy that is so prevalent around here. In contact with the progress of Rome, they would modify their ideas about life, society, religion and politics."

While these two talked about the personality and teachings of the master from Nazareth, another scene was occurring inside the house.

In the sick little girl's room we find Livia and Ana treating the sores that now had spread all over her skin in one open wound.

Ana, a kind and humble heart not much older than her mistress, had become Livia's favorite aide out of all her household servants. In that desert of hearts, it was in this intelligent and loving servant that Livia's sensitive soul had found a haven for her daily confidences and struggles.

"Ah, ma'am!" the slave exclaimed with sincere concern transpiring in her eyes and gestures. "My soul is filled with deep

faith in the miracles of the Master, and I believe that if we took the child to receive his blessings, the sores would disappear and she would be restored to your motherly love … Who knows?"

"Unfortunately," Livia replied thoughtfully and sadly, "I wouldn't dare think of it. Publius would refuse it due to our social position. But truthfully, I would like to see this loving and extraordinary man you are always telling me about."

"Just last Saturday, ma'am," responded the slave, encouraged by Livia's words of sympathy, "the prophet of Nazareth blessed several children.

"When he got out of Simon's boat, we were all waiting for him to hear his consoling words. We all rushed to him, anxious to receive the sacred blessings of his comforting presence, but on that day several mothers had come to hear him preach. They had brought their children, who ran around playing, yelling in their shrill voices like a flock of twittering little birds. Simon and some of the other disciples began to scold them in an effort to make sure that we would not miss the enchantment of the Master's sweet and gentle words. However, the Master sat on his usual rock and said with unspeakable tenderness: 'Let the children come to me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.' A remarkable silence ensued among the Capernaum folk and the pilgrims who had come from Corazim and Magdala, while the restless little ones ran to his loving lap, kissing his robe with indefinable joy.

"A lot of the children were sick and had been brought to the lakeside by their mothers to be healed from chronic illnesses or incurable diseases."

"What a beautifully uplifting story!" Livia exclaimed, deeply moved. "Even so, in spite of all the resources at my disposal, I feel that I shall not be able to receive the same benefits from your Master."

"That's a pity, ma'am, because a lot of upper class women follow him in the city. It's not just us, the most humble, who attend his sermons. Several socially important women in Capernaum, wives of the employees of Herod and publicans, listen to his loving lessons by the lake right alongside the poor and the slaves. The prophet disdains no one. He invites all to the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Unlike all other messengers from heaven that we have known, he leaves those most favored by fate in order to be near the less fortunate. He regards everyone as the beloved brethren of his heart."

Livia listened to her slave with enraptured attention. The figure of that famous and good man had a remarkable effect on her spirit.

And while her big eyes expressed the greatest interest in her loyal servant's enchanting and simple tales, neither of them realized that the sick little girl was listening to them with keen curiosity – as little children do – in spite of the high fever devastating her body.

Just then, after Sulpicius's departure, the senator came into the little girl's room filled with fatherly anxiety.

The two women fell silent in his presence and focused only on the tasks that had brought them together at the bedside of the little girl, who was now moaning in terrible pain.

Publius Lentulus bent over his daughter's bed, his eyes wet with tears.

He played with her emaciated, sore-covered tiny hands, trying to cheer her up, his soul touched by infinite sorrow.

"My little dear, what would you like today to make you sleep better?" he asked in a choking voice, bringing tears to Livia's eyes.

"I will buy you lots of toys and fun things … Tell daddy what you want."

Copious sweat drenched the ulcerated body of the girl, revealing her dreadful anguish. She made a supreme effort, as if trying the impossible to respond to her father's question.

"Tell me, dear child," murmured Publius, all choked up, seeing her desire to say something.

"I'll get you anything you want … I'll send a runner to Rome just to bring back all your toys ..."

Only with much effort could the little one whisper in a tired, nearly imperceptible voice:

"Daddy … I want … the prophet … from Nazareth."

The senator lowered his eyes, humiliated and confused in light of this unforeseen answer, while Livia and Ana, as if touched by an invisible and mysterious power arising from the unexpected scene, hid their faces, drenched in tears.

V
The Messiah from Nazareth

The following day dawned with deep concerns for Publius and his family.

Very early, we find him in intimate conversation with his wife, speaking to him in a pleading and affectionate tone:

"Darling, perhaps you should ease the harshness of the situation we have been placed in by fate, and seek out that kind man to help our daughter. Everyone talks about his deeds. They are impressed by his uplifting goodness, and I believe his soul would have mercy on our devastating situation."

Apprehensive and uncertain, the senator listened to her and finally agreed:

"Very well, Livia. I will accede to your wishes, but only the anguish of our souls leads me to so rashly transgress my principles.

"I shall not proceed as you have suggested, however. I'll go by myself into town as if for simple leisure. I'll take the road that leads to the shores of the lake, without going so far as to approach the prophet personally. That way I won't lessen my social and political dignity. If things work out, I'll tell him how glad we would be if he would pay us a visit to cure our little one."

"Oh, good!" said Livia, relieved and grateful. "I hold the sincerest and deepest faith in my soul. Yes, go, my dear! ... I'll be praying for heaven to bless our effort. The prophet has appeared as a true physician of souls. He will see that, behind your position as a senator of the Empire, there are hearts that suffer and weep!"

Publius perceived his wife's overly-enthusiastic praises, allowing herself to be overcome by what he deemed an excess of weakness and piety. He did not admonish her, however, in light of the sorrow they were going through, and which certainly could unhinge the strongest mind.

He let the busy hours of the day slip away with the sunlight in the west, and as twilight poured out its soft hues on the magnificent landscape, he left, pretending he needed to take a break and stating that he wanted to get to know the town's ancient fountain, one of the main attractions to outsiders.

About three hundred feet down the road, he met bystanders and fishermen, who drew back and looked at him with undisguised curiosity.

A whole hour passed as he pondered his anguish, lost in thought.

An immense canopy of shadow had begun to settle over the entire region, filled with vitality and fragrances.

Where would the prophet from Nazareth be at that moment? Mightn't the tales of his miracles and his enchanting

magic over souls be a mere illusion? Wasn't it absurd to be looking for him on this road, disregarding the imperatives of social hierarchy? At any rate, he must be a simple, uneducated man, given his preference for Capernaum and fishermen.

Giving free rein to the ideas flowing through his burning and distressed mind, Publius Lentulus thought that a meeting with the Master from Nazareth was highly unlikely.

How would they understand each other?

He had not been the least bit interested in a closer understanding of the dialect of the common folk, and Jesus, of course, spoke the Aramaic commonly used in the Tiberias basin.

Profound doubts spilled from his mind to his heart, like the shadows of twilight before nighttime.

The sky at that time of day turned a wonderful dark blue, whereas the opaline light of the moon had not waited for the night to set in.

The senator felt his heart lost in an abyss of infinite conjectures, beating erratically in his oppressed chest. Conflicting emotions tormented the innermost fibers of his spirit. He was unaware that he had leaned on a stone bench covered in bramble, his mind wandering in deep thought.

He had never experienced such a feeling except in that memorable dream he had related only to Flaminius.

He recalled the smallest details of his earthly life as if he had temporarily abandoned the prison of his physical body. He felt a profound ecstasy before nature and its marvels, unable to express his admiration and acknowledgement of the powers of heaven; such was the cloister in which he had always confined his proud, unyielding soul.

Sweet fragrances seemed to emanate from the gentle waters of Lake Gennesaret to blend delightfully with the wild scent of the foliage.

It was then, as if his spirit were under the imperative of a strange, gentle magnetism, that he heard the light footsteps of someone who had come looking for that same spot.

There, before his anxious eyes, stood a unique, unmistakable figure. It was a young man who displayed a gentle and indefinable beauty in his profoundly merciful eyes. Long and silky hair framed his compassionate face, like brown strands tinged with the gold of an unknown light. A divine smile, revealing at the same time immense goodness and singular energy, radiated an irresistible appeal from his melancholy, majestic figure.

Publius Lentulus had no difficulty identifying this impressive individual, but sentiments unbeknownst to him until then stirred wildly in his heart. Not even his appearance before Tiberius in the grandeur of Capri had aroused such feelings. Burning tears streamed from his eyes, which rarely wept, and a mysterious, invincible power made him kneel on the moonlit grass. He wanted to speak, but his chest felt heavy and suffocated. In a gesture of sweet, supreme goodness, the gentle Nazarene walked towards him like a materialized vision of one of the gods of his ancient beliefs. Lovingly placing his hand on his head, he asked him in an enchanting language, which Publius understood as perfectly as if it were the patrician idiom, indelibly etching in his soul the unforgettable feeling that the words were from spirit to spirit, heart to heart:

"Why are you looking for me, Senator?" And casting his profound gaze over the landscape, as if wanting his voice to be heard by every man and woman on the planet, he continued with serene nobility: "It would have been better if you had come publicly and in broad daylight in order to learn once and for all the sublime lesson of faith and humility … But I have not come into the world to alter the supreme laws of nature. I have come here to meet your ailing soul!"

Publius Lentulus could not express his feelings, except for the copious tears of sorrow for his little daughter. The prophet, however, as if not needing to hear his unspoken words, continued:

"No … I have not come to meet the superficial, proud statesman, whom only centuries of suffering can lead to the bosom of my Father. I have come in answer to the pleas of a grief-stricken and oppressed heart; but above all, my friend, your sentiment is not what will save your leprous little daughter, forsaken by the science of the world, because your frame of mind is still selfish and human; rather, it is the faith and love of your wife, for faith is divine … Only one ray of its powerful energies is enough to crush all the monuments of earth's vanities."

Profoundly moved and magnetized by this presence, it seemed to the senator that his soul was floating in a dream world, such was the extent of the unknown and unexpected emotions flooding his heart. He wanted to believe that his true sentiments were now locked in an incomprehensible game of illusion.

"No, my friend, you are not dreaming," the Master said kindly and compellingly, divining Publius's thoughts. "After many years of deviation from the path of the good due to your blatant wrongs, today you have come to the turning point for the regeneration of your entire life.

"It is up to you, however, to take advantage of it either now or a few millennia from now … If the unfolding of human life depends on circumstances, you must consider that they come in all forms, leaving it up to individuals to exert the power of will and sentiment in seeking to align their destinies with goodness and love for their fellow beings.

"At his very moment, a glorious point in time has arrived for your spirit if you can utilize your freedom to forever imprint it on your heart, turning it into in a hymn of love, humility and faith, in the not-yet determined moment of redemption within eternity.

"But no one can impose an act that is against your conscience if it is your desire to spurn this blessed moment indefinitely!

"I have been the shepherd of human souls since the formation of the world, for many millennia I have tried to reunite my stray sheep to bring to their hearts the eternal joys of the kingdom of God and his righteousness!"

Publius gazed at that extraordinary man, whose self-assurance caused both admiration and fear.

Humility? What credentials did the prophet have to speak to him like that, to him, a senator of the Empire, vested with every power before a vassal?

In a flash he remembered the city of the Caesars, covered in triumph and glory, and whose monuments and powers he believed – at that moment – were immortal.

"All the powers of your empire are quite tenuous and all its wealth is paltry.

"The magnificence of the Caesars is an ephemeral illusion that lasts one day, because all wise men, as well as all warriors, are called at the right time to the tribunals of justice of my Father in Heaven. Some day its powerful eagles will cease to exist under a handful of miserable ashes. Its culture will be transformed by the efforts of other workers worthier of progress. Its unjust laws will be swallowed by the dark abyss of these centuries of impiety, for there is only one law and it will survive the ruins of human unrest: the law of love, established by my Father from the beginning of creation.

"Now, go home, aware of the responsibilities of your destiny.

"If faith has established in your house what you regard as bliss because of your daughter's recovery, do not forget that it represents an increase in your soul's duties before our Almighty Father!"

The senator wanted to speak, but his voice was hindered by internal turmoil and profound new feelings.

He wanted to leave, but just then he saw the prophet from Nazareth transfigured, his eyes uplifted to heaven.

That place amid the fragrant heart of nature surely must be a sanctuary for the prophet's meditations and prayers, Publius deduced at seeing Jesus praying intensely with abundant tears streaming down his face bathed in soft light, displaying its serene beauty and indefinable melancholy.

A gentle torpor stopped the patrician's faculties of observation, and he became still, completely dumbfounded.

It must have been around 9:00 p.m. when the senator came back to his senses.

A light breeze was caressing his hair and the moon shone its silvery rays on the immense, lovely mirror of the water.

Recalling the smallest details of that unforgettable moment, Publius felt humiliated and small in light of the weakness he had displayed before that extraordinary man.

A torrent of conflicting thoughts flooded his mind regarding the admonitions and words of the prophet, now forever imprinted in the depths of his mind.

Didn't Rome also have its sorcerers? He tried to remember all the mysterious tales of that far-off city with its impressive and enigmatic individuals.

Wasn't that man an exact copy of the magicians and soothsayers who also concerned Roman society?

Thus, should he, Publius, forsake his most cherished homeland and family traditions to become a humble man and brother of all people? He smiled to himself in his presumed superiority as he pondered the inanity of those exhortations, considered by him to be utterly loathsome. His reasoning notwithstanding, poignant appeals continued to rise from his heart to his mind. Hadn't the prophet spoken of a unique, marvelous opportunity? Hadn't he resolutely promised his daughter's cure on account of Livia's ardent faith?

Immersed in such inner cogitations, he cautiously opened the door of his house and walked anxiously to Flavia's room. Oh! Sweet miracle! The little one was lying in Livia's arms, completely at peace.

An unknown, superhuman power had mitigated her atrocious suffering, and her eyes now displayed a sweet, childlike happiness that lit up her smiling face. Filled with motherly jubilation, Livia told him that at a given moment, the little girl had told her that she felt the touch of loving hands on her brow. She sat up in bed as if a mysterious energy were revitalizing her body in some unexpected way. She had eaten; the fever had subsided against all expectations; and she now acted like a convalescent, talking with her mother with all the spontaneous charm of a little girl.

Finishing the description of the child's recovery, the young woman concluded enthusiastically:

"As soon as you left, Ana and I prayed fervently next to our little girl, imploring the prophet to heed your plea in answer to our prayers. And now our little one has been healed! ... My dearest, could there possibly be anything happier than this? ... Ah! Jesus must be a direct emissary of Jupiter, sent to this world on a glorious mission of love and joy for all souls!"

Ana, however, who had been listening deeply moved, offered a spontaneous explanation rising from the delightful happiness of the moment:

"Oh, no, ma'am! ... Jesus has not come at Jupiter's bidding. He is the Son of God, his Father and our Father in Heaven, whose heart is always full of goodness and mercy for all beings, just as the Master has taught us. So, let us praise the Almighty for the grace received and thank Jesus with a humble prayer."

Publius Lentulus followed the scene in silence, put off by his wife's close friendship with a simple house servant. With

profound displeasure, he observed not only the spontaneity of Livia's enthusiastic gratefulness, but Ana's interjection in the conversation, which he considered an audacity. In an instant he mobilized all the reserves of his pride to reestablish the internal discipline of his house, and reassuming his normal haughty airs, he spoke curtly to his wife:

"Livia, you must stop such impetuosity! After all, I see nothing extraordinary about what has just happened. Our daughter lacked nothing regarding the treatment and care she needed, and logically we could expect a healthy reaction in her organism due to our constant assistance.

"As for you, Ana," he said arrogantly to the intimidated slave, "I think the chore that kept you for such a long time in this room is over. Considering the girl's improvement, I do not see any need for you to remain in your mistress's service. She has brought enough personal servants from Rome."

Ana glanced sorrowfully at Livia, who displayed obvious signs of dismay in light of these unexpected remarks. Bowing slightly and respectfully, she left the room where she had dedicated the best of her efforts in loving selflessness.

"What was that, Publius?" Livia asked, deeply moved. "Just when we ought to show our dedicated servant the joy of our recognition, you act with such harshness?"

"Your childish behavior forced me to. What would people say about a mistress who opens her soul to her humblest slaves? Where is your heart with such displays of excessive trust? I am displeased to see that there are profound differences between us now. Why such blatant trust in the prophet from Nazareth, when he is no better than the magicians and sorcerers of Rome? Moreover, where do you keep the traditions of our family gods if you cannot keep the faith around the home altar?"

"I cannot agree with you, darling. I am fully convinced that our little Flavia was healed by that extraordinary man ... At the moment of her sudden improvement, when she told us about the sublime hands caressing her, I saw with my own eyes that her bed was saturated with a different light, such as I had never seen before."

"A different light? You are obviously delirious after so much exertion; or else you have been caught up in the hallucinations of these fanatical people into whose midst we had the bad luck to fall."

"No, my love, I am not delirious. In spite of your words, which come from the heart I adore and admire most on earth, I am sure that the Nazarene Master has just healed our daughter. And as for Ana, my dear, I think your attitude is unjust and quite contrary to your proverbial kindness toward the slaves of our household. We cannot, nor must we forget her complete dedication to me and our daughter in this remote place. Her beliefs might be different than ours, but I think that her honest and dedicated conduct can only honor the service of our house."

The senator considered the integrity of his wife's opinion, regretting his impulsive act and surrendering to the good sense of her words.

"All right, Livia, I appreciate the worthiness of your heart and will allow Ana to continue in your private service; but I will not acquiesce in the case of our daughter's healing. I shall not admit that her recovery is to be attributed to the magician from Nazareth. Furthermore, you should always remember that it pleases me to know that your trust and intimacy is reserved only for me. Patricians, and especially Roman matrons, must not open the doors of their hearts to strangers or servants."

"You know how I respect your orders," said his wife, feeling more comforted, looking at him with affection and gratitude,

"and I ask you to forgive me if I have offended your generous and sensitive soul!"

"No, my dear, if there is a need for forgiveness, I'm the one who should be asking for it, but you know how much this region upsets and terrifies me. I feel comforted, however, in seeing our daughter's favorable reaction because this means we can return to Rome very soon. We will wait just a few more days. Tomorrow, I will ask Sulpicius to begin preparations for our departure."

Livia agreed with her husband as she caressed the little one, now recovered from the profound debility that had prostrated her for so long. Inwardly, she joyfully thanked Jesus, for her heart told her that what had occurred was a blessing that the Father in Heaven had sent to her maternal spirit through the holy, loving hands of the Master.

Publius, however, obeying the impulse of his personal vanity, had no desire whatsoever to remember the extraordinary figure that had appeared before his astonished eyes. He built castles of theories in his overexcited imagination in order to dismiss the direct intervention of that man in the case of his daughter's healing, thereby overriding the objection of his own meticulous observation and analysis.

He could not forget that the prophet had enveloped him in unknown forces that had silenced his voice and caused him to fall to his knees, a circumstance that sorely wounded his despotic pride, and which he regarded as a painful humiliation.

Tormenting ideas filled his exhausted mind, filled with so many internal struggles, and after having invoked his family's guardian spirits on the household altar, he tried to rest from his bitter inner fatigue.

That night, however, on the soothing wings of sleep, his soul once again experienced the same memories of his prior existence. He saw himself wearing the same Consul insignias

from Cicero's time. He saw once more the atrocities committed by Publius Lentulus Sura, his expulsion from the Consulate, the secret meetings with Lucius Sergius Catilina, the revolutionary corruption. He felt himself led again into the presence of that same tribunal of austere and venerated judges, who, in his previous dream, had told him of his rebirth on earth during a time of great spiritual awakening.

Before those venerable magistrates in immaculate togas, he felt bitter anguish beating out of control in his heart.

The same respectable judge stood up in the sublime ambient of spiritual light and said:

"Publius Lentulus, why did you disdain that glorious moment, with which you could have acquired the everlasting and radiant instance of your redemption in eternity? This evening, you found yourself between two paths – the path of a servant of Jesus and the path of a servant of the world. On the former, your yoke would have been easy and your burden light; but you chose the latter, where there is not enough love to wash away all iniquity... Therefore, be prepared to follow it daringly, because you preferred the harder way, where there are no flowers of humility to soften the harshness of the poisonous thorns!

"You shall suffer greatly, for on this road the yoke is unyielding and the burden is very heavy; nonetheless, you acted under your freewill in the broad game of the circumstances of your life ... Led to a wonderful opportunity, you persisted in your purpose of traveling the bitter and painful road of harsher and more severe trials.

"We do not condemn you; we simply lament the hardening of your spirit when faced with the truth and the light! Strengthen all the fibers of your being because from now on the struggles ahead will be enormous!"

He had been listening attentively to that moving exhortation, when he awoke to the sensations of material life, experiencing a peculiar mental weariness along with an indefinable sadness.

It was still early when his attention was called for by Livia, who showed him the convalescing and happy little Flavia. Her skin had become smooth due to an unknown and wonderful healing process, and the purplish hues that preceded the living sores had all but vanished.

The senator recovered his peace of mind somewhat when he saw the positive improvements in his daughter, whom he lovingly clasped to his heart, saying more calmly:

"Livia, it is quite true that last evening I was with the so-called master of Nazareth, but under the logic of my education and knowledge, I cannot believe that he is the source of our daughter's recovery."

And he related superficially the events known to us, but without referring to the details that had impressed him the most.

Livia listened attentively to his story, but realizing his disposition towards the prophet, whom she considered a superior and venerable individual, she did not want to express her thoughts on the matter, fearing it would lead to an inappropriate and unjustifiable clash of opinions. In her heart, she thanked that loving and compassionate Jesus, who had responded to her anguished, maternal pleas. In the core of her soul she cherished the hope of humbly kissing the fringe of his robe in testimony to her sincere acknowledgement before returning to Rome.

Four days passed, and the little patient showed obvious signs of solid physical recovery, which was reason for great joy in everyone's hearts.

One radiant morning, we find young Livia rocking her little son, who was about to have his first birthday. She was giving

instructions to her Jewish maid, Semele, who had been assigned to take care of little Marcus based on the interest she showed in the boy from the moment she was hired. At a certain point, the servant called out, pointing to the wide stone road:

"Ma'am, two strange men are approaching on horseback, galloping very fast."

Upon hearing this, Livia too saw them on the broad highway. She went inside to alert her husband. In a few minutes two sweating and panting horses had stopped short at their door. A man dressed in Roman style, accompanied by a Jewish guide, dismounted quickly and in a good disposition.

It was Quirilius, one of Flaminius Severus's trusted free slaves, who had come in his employer's name to bring some news and greetings to Publius and his family.

This pleasant surprise filled the day with happy memories and wholesome enjoyment, bringing hours of ineffable contentment. The noble patrician had not forgotten his distant friends, and along with comforting news and a considerable remittance of money, came sweet remembrances from Calpurnia, addressed to Livia and her two children.

That day, Publius Lentulus kept himself busy by filling up several rolls of parchment in order to send his companion-in-struggle some detailed news of what had happened so far. Among these was the good news of his little daughter's recovery, which he attributed to the lovely Galilean climate. Because that brave descendant of the Severus line was the soul of a dedicated and loyal brother, to whom he would never fail to confide his most hidden sentiments, he wrote a long, supplemental letter meant for the Roman Senate regarding the personality of Jesus Christ. His tone was calm, written from a strictly human point of view, with no sentimental impetuosity. And finally, Publius and Livia happily announced to their distant friends that they

would be returning to Rome, possibly within a month, given the perfect recovery of little Flavia.

It was late when he finished. On this same day, however, as night fell, while the couple amused themselves on the triclinium by rereading the sweet words of their dear absent friends, weaving cheerful hopes of their imminent return, Sulpicius announced himself, accompanied by a messenger from Pilate.

Attending them in his private office, the senator received the visit of the emissary, who spoke respectfully in these terms:

"Your Excellency, the governor of Judea would like to inform you that he has arrived at his residence on the outskirts of Nazareth, where he looks forward to the pleasure of your orders and news."

"Thank you!" replied Publius, in good spirits, adding: "It's a good thing the procurator isn't far away. It will be an opportunity for a little delay in Jerusalem before my return to Rome in a few days!"

They exchanged a few more words of protocol, but Publius Lentulus did not pay particular attention to Sulpicius, who was gazing at him in a peculiar way.

VI
The Abduction

At the time of Christ, Galilee was a huge granary that supplied almost all of Palestine.

In those days, the water level of the beautiful Lake of Gennesaret was not as low as it is today. The entire surrounding land was irrigated by numerous springs and canals. Waterwheels were used to lift the water, resulting in the luxurious vegetation that decorated the idyllic landscape with fruit and filled it with fragrance.

Wheat, barley, squash, lentils, figs and grapes were crops planted and harvested year round, bringing satisfaction and abundance to life. Mixed in with large vineyards and olive groves, precious palm trees and date palms grew on the higher terrain, producing the plushest fruit in Palestine.

In Capernaum, in addition to these riches, the fishing industry prospered given the abundance of fish in what was then called the "Sea of Galilee," epitomizing a simple and

tranquil life. Among all the other peoples of the Galilean areas, those of Capernaum stood out for their unpretentious and simple spiritual comeliness. Conscientious and faithful, they believed in the Law of Moses, but were a far cry from the hypocritical displays of the Pharisaism of Jerusalem. It was by virtue of this natural simplicity and spontaneous, sincere faith that the landscape of Capernaum served as the stage for the first unforgettable and immortal lessons of Christianity in its primitive purity. There, Jesus found the affection of devoted and valiant hearts, and it was there that the spirit world found the best elements for forming the memorable school, where the Divine Master would exemplify his teachings.

There were synagogues in all the towns of the region so that lessons on the Law could be conducted on the sabbath, the day individuals were to dedicate exclusively to rest for the body and to activities of the spirit. In these small synagogues anyone who wished to speak was allowed to do so, but Jesus preferred the pleasing temple of nature for spreading his teachings.

All the humble classes went to his open air sermons, whose extraordinary beauty captivated even the most hardened hearts.

An ancient custom among masters stated that servants must rest on the day consecrated to studying the Law, and the Romans themselves tried to cultivate such regional traditions in order to gain the favor of the conquered people.

On that day, a large number of slaves would come to hear the consoling preaching of the Messiah of Nazareth.

A week had passed since the news from Rome had arrived, and on that sabbath in the early afternoon hours, Livia and Ana were engaged in a private and friendly conversation.

"Yes," said the young patrician to her servant, who was dressed to go out, "if you could possibly thank the prophet personally in my name … I'm so happy, thanks to his infinite

kindness. And tell him that, if I can, the day before leaving for Rome I will try to meet him so that I can kiss his generous hands in witness of my recognition!"

"I won't forget and I do hope that you will be able to go to Simon's house to visit him before you leave these parts ... Before this day is over," she continued in a confidential tone, "I shall meet old uncle Simeon in the city. He has come all the way from Samaria for the sole purpose of receiving Jesus' blessing and hearing his teachings. I don't know if you are aware of it or not, but quarrels between the Samaritans and the Galileans go way back; however, in his lessons on love and fraternity, the Master has often has praised the Samaritans for their loyal and sincere charity. He has performed many miracles in Samaria, and my uncle is one of the beneficiaries who will receive the blessing from his consoling hands today!"

A sweet, moving faith anointed the soul of that common woman, intensifying Livia's desire to meet that extraordinary man who could illuminate the most unlearned, simple hearts with his graces.

"Ana, wait a second," she said, heading for her quarters. Upon returning, her face radiant with happiness for being able to begin her Christian sympathy right there, she gave her servant a few coins and exclaimed with great joy:

"Take this money to your uncle Simeon in my name ... He has come a long way to see the Messiah and could use a little something!"

Ana joyfully accepted the sum of a few denarii, considered a small fortune. Thanking Livia for the gift, she left a few minutes later with Semele and her other companions, taking the road to Capernaum before heading for the lake, where they would wait until late afternoon when Simon Bar-Jona's boat would bring the Messiah for his customary preaching.

Once in the town, she first hurried towards a poor old shack, where the aging Simeon embraced her affectionately, weeping with happiness. Great joy filled those humble hearts because of Livia's generous gift, which represented a small treasure for them.

Leaving her companions behind in order to meet her uncle, Ana did not notice as Semele went right away in the direction of a house hidden among several olive trees at the end of an almost completely deserted alley.

A few knocks on the door and a comely woman came to greet her.

"Has our friend arrived?" asked the servant, affecting serenity.

"Yes, he has been here since yesterday waiting for you. Just a moment, please."

In a few minutes, a person known to us came to meet Semele in one of the corners of the room. He embraced her effusively as if he were extremely fond of her.

It was Andre of Gioras. He had come to Capernaum to get his revenge with the help of an ally, whom, in his thirst for reprisal and cruel shrewdness, he had managed to place in the house of Publius Lentulus in Jerusalem.

After a long discussion in hushed voices, we hear the senator's servant speaking to him in these terms:

"No doubt about it ... I've managed to gain the entire trust of my employers and the trust of the little one. So, you can rest assured that the timing is perfect because the senator is planning to return to Rome in a few days!"

"That bastard!" uttered Andre, full of rage. "So, he's already thinking of going back? Perfect! ... That damned Roman ignored my paternal pleas and enslaved my poor son forever. Now he's going to pay very dearly for his effrontery, for his own son shall

be a slave in my house! Someday I shall reveal my revenge and prove to him that I too am a man!"

He said these words between his teeth in a sullen voice, his eyes staring and shining as if he were addressing invisible beings.

"Is everything ready?" He asked Semele, showing definitive resolve.

"All set," replied the servant calmly.

"Very well; three days from now I'll go there on horseback in the middle of the night."

Handing her a tiny flask, which she carefully hid inside her clothing, he continued in a muffled voice:

"Twenty drops will be enough for the child to go to sleep and not wake up for twelve hours ... Later that evening, give him the drink in a little water lightly mixed with weak wine and wait for my signal. I cased the house yesterday and I'll be nearby, waiting for the precious bundle. You'll hold the sleeping child tight so that the size will not betray the contents if seen from a distance. Since in situations like this you have to be aware of the possibility of being seen by unknown eyes, I'll be dressed as a Roman, and I need you to dress in one of your mistress's tunics so that we can avoid the blame of the abduction falling on one of our own people, in case some inopportune and unexpected witness shows up ... When I give you a signal on the road that goes by the orchard, you'll come and give me the precious parcel."

And with his gaze lost in the anticipated vision of his revenge, Andre of Gioras exclaimed, clenching his fists:

"If the damned Romans enslave our children without pity, we too can enslave their wretched offspring! ... Men were born with equal rights in this world."

Listening closely to his words, a somewhat alarmed Semele asked:

"But what about me? Won't I be going along with little Marcus that night?"

"That would be stupid. You'll have to stay in Capernaum as long as necessary, until all traces of the future senator – who will be nothing but a future slave – have vanished. Your disappearance would be a definite clue now or later, and we need to avoid that path.

"As you know, I have rich relatives in Judea, and it's not too much to hope that a stroke of luck will grant me a coveted place in the Jerusalem temple. So, we can't have any complications with the law; but you can rest assured that later on your efforts of today will be generously compensated."

The servant sighed in resignation, conceding to all the plans of that revengeful spirit.

A few hours later, at nightfall, Publius's servants were returning to the estate in animated and happy conversation, commenting on the minor incidents and concerns of the day.

Semele did not seem worried, especially because she had been patiently instructed by Andre for a long time now to boldly participate in his plan of vengeance. Numerous ties linked her to the Gioras family, and in cooperating in that sinister plot she felt she was doing nothing more than paying off many of her debts.

As soon as this plot with the little one is over, she thought to herself, she would return to Jerusalem whenever she pleased, conscious of having fulfilled a duty of obedience to Andre's tremendous demands.

The next day, she calculated all the possibilities for the success of the undertaking, and on the appointed date, she took all the necessary steps.

Obtaining one of Livia's tunics was not difficult. She had several and almost every day Ana collected those outside her mistress's private quarters for cleaning. Thus, avoiding

Ana's attention, Semele took one of Livia's fine, elegant tunics according to the instructions of Andre, with whom she had become an accomplice.

At home, the senator and his wife had never experienced such moments of peace and hope ever since they had arrived in Palestine. Their daughter's cure was the sweetest happiness of every moment, filling them with tender plans of a joyous future.

Livia was already in the midst of organizing what she needed for traveling, since within a few days they would be in the ancient port of Joppa on the way back to their beloved city.

A tranquil serenity that nothing seemed to perturb now rested on the couple, bringing happiness and peace to their hearts.

Publius had completely forgotten the warnings of his dream, which he considered to be simply the result of his amazing conversation with the prophet of Nazareth. The heaviness in his heart had lifted, as he relied on human power arising from his proud vanity, stifling any concerns of a spiritual nature. One single thought occupied his mind – returning to Rome in a few days.

That night, however, all his plans would topple and his destiny would forever change its course.

Those aware of the plot hatched in the shadows by Andre's vengeful spirit would be able to hear a long whistle repeated three times in the gloomy silence of the grove after midnight.

A man in Roman dress dismounted from a spirited steed a few yards from the house on the wide road that separated the vegetation of the fields from the fruit trees. Then, a door opened furtively and a woman dressed in patrician style approached the horseman waiting for her anxiously and she deposited a bulky package in his hands with extreme care.

"Semele," he whispered, "this is a decisive hour in our destinies!"

Lentulus's servant could not answer, feeling her chest oppressed.

At that moment, the actors in this scene did not notice that a man had approached, stopping a short distance away in the thickness of the dark foliage.

"Now," said the horseman again before riding off as fast as he could, "remember that silence is golden. If, someday, you are ungrateful and our secret gets out, you shall pay with your life!"

That said, Andre of Gioras left, galloping down dark roads with his precious bundle.

Semele watched him for a few seconds, both frightened and remorseful, before walking off with unsteady steps.

Neither of them knew that the eyes of a slanderer are worse than the hands of a thief, and that such eyes had been watching them in the solitude of the night.

It was Sulpicius, who, by coincidence, was going home late that night and was surprised by the scene wanly illuminated in the moonlight.

Observing at some distance a man and a woman in Roman dress meeting at such an inappropriate hour, he deadened his feline steps among the trees so that he could identify them from a closer vantage point.

The scene, however, had ended very quickly and all he could hear were the final words "our secret" by Andre in his hateful and menacing promise.

Then, he then saw that once the horseman had left, the woman stumbled back inside as if overcome by an uncontrollable weakness. He hastened his steps to surprise her since she was only a few yards away. But he did not dare to get any closer, identifying only the details of her garment in the pale light of the night. He knew that tunic. In his mind the woman was Livia, the only one who dressed like that in that neighborhood.

In an instant his quick thoughts as a man with experience in the worst type of conduct put facts, personalities and things together. He remembered in intimate detail the scene he had witnessed in Pilate's garden, believing that Publius's wife had become the lover of the governor, whose heart she had captured in a matter of minutes with her extraordinary beauty. He also remembered that the procurator of Judea was staying in Nazareth, and concluded to himself:

"In spite of his high position, a governor is still a man, and on a good mount a man is quite capable of covering the distance from Capernaum to Nazareth in one night to meet his lover ... Imagine! ... Now we must pursue this and watch this couple in love ... The only strange thing is how easily this apparently austere woman let herself get carried away like this! But since I have my pact with Fulvia, let's figure out the best way to tell the poor man that, despite being a very young and rich senator, he is a very unlucky husband!"

And after this cautious monologue, Sulpicius left, satisfied at seeing that he was master of the situation, already relishing the moment when he would make his secret known to Publius. Then, later on in Jerusalem, he would demand the shameless price for his perversity, according to Fulvia's promises.

The next day came as a painful surprise for the senator and his wife, who were stunned by the unexpected event.

No one knew the circumstances under which the child had been abducted in the silence of the night.

Like a madman, Publius Lentulus took every possible measure with the Capernaum authorities, but it was no use. A number of his trusted servants were sent to canvass the outskirts, but to no avail. And while her husband was giving more and more orders and taking more and more measures, Livia retired to her bed, overcome with indescribable anguish.

Feigning profound consternation, Semele helped Ana to care for their mistress, who had succumbed to grief.

That same afternoon, Publius ordered Comenius, who was in charge of all the work on the estate, to gather all the household servants so that they could learn a lesson from the severe punishment inflicted on the slaves responsible for the previous night's guard duty. Throughout the early morning hours the whip lashed the flesh of three robust men who begged in vain for clemency and mercy while proclaiming their innocence. As she saw those unjustly punished individuals, Semele finally realized the extent of her deed, but terrified of the possible consequences of the crime, she collected herself to hide her guilt and the terrible secret.

The punitive action continued until Livia, tormented by the piercing and heartrending screams, got out of bed with extreme difficulty, and calling her husband to a corner of the veranda, where he was impassively watching the horrible torture of those miserable creatures, she pleaded:

"Publius, please; no more punishment for these debilitated and unfortunate men! ... Mightn't our excessive harshness towards our slaves be the cause of our excessively harsh punishment by the gods? Aren't these slaves also the children of someone who loved them as much? In my maternal anguish I know we have the right and resources to keep our beloved children close to us; but how torturous it must be for the mother of a poor wretch, seeing him yanked from her loving arms to be sold by loathsome traders in human beings!"

"Livia, your suffering is filling you with odd thoughts," said the senator with serene vigor.

"How could you even think of such an absurd equality of rights between a Roman patrician and a wretched slave? Can't you see that between you and the mother of a captive there are considerable differences of sentiment?"

"You're wrong," replied his wife with indescribable bitterness, "because even the animals have the highest instincts when it comes to motherhood.

"Even so, darling, even if I am wrong, reason tells us to examine our position as parents and remember that no one but us is guilty for what has happened, since our children are a sacred gift from the gods, who have entrusted them to our hearts, imposing on us the duty at every moment to show them the tenderness and care they need. If I am suffering bitterly, it is for the sublime love that unites us to our children, for not being able to fathom the cause of this mysterious crime, and for not being able to pin the blame on our servants for this horrible occurrence."

Livia's voice, however, quickly faded. Her vehement words had resulted in a fainting spell at the end of a day filled with so many and such bitter emotions. Supported by Ana's loving and dedicated care, the poor woman went to bed with a high fever. As for Publius, with his wife's bitter truths aching deep in his heart, to everyone's relief he ordered the punishment to be stopped and withdrew to his office to think things over.

That night, he received a visit from Sulpicius, who had come to bring him the fruitless results of his investigations on the trail of little Marcus.

As he was leaving, to Publius's great surprise, the lictor said enigmatically:

"Senator, I cannot explain the heinous mystery of your little son's disappearance, but perhaps I can guide you on a sure path with my personal observations about the matter."

"If you have any details, don't be afraid to tell me," replied Publius with great interest.

"My observations are not all conclusive, and since there are some remedies that, instead of healing, produce incurable

wounds, I think it would be better to postpone my impressions about the facts until tomorrow night."

Relishing the perplexed reaction of his listener, deeply affected by these criminal insinuations, Sulpicius ended his farewells, deliberately adding:

"I will be here at the same time tomorrow, and if I cannot satisfy your desire today by staying longer, it is because I need to tend to a few other obligations at my office. I need to respond to certain requests for information from our administrative authorities."

Overcome by the succession of events involving this mystery, Publius Lentulus bid him farewell, finding the strength to mutter:

"Until tomorrow, then. I'll await the fulfillment of your promise to find relief for my heart's fears."

Left alone, the senator immersed himself in the depth of his uneasiness and dread.

Just when he was counting on returning to Rome, the unexpected had happened, with even worse implications than his daughter's illness, which he had endured for so many years with serenity and resignation. Now it had to do with the baffling abduction of a child, together with serious issues involving the morality of his household and the very honor of his family.

Deep down, he felt he had no enemies in Palestine. Except for Saul, son of Andre – whom he believed to be at peace in his father's home – he had never humiliated the self-respect of any Israelite; in fact, he had given everyone the best of his attention.

What could be the cause of this mysterious crime?

In his mind surfaced the trustworthy advice of Flaminius Severus, counseling him to exert great prudence and personal power in Palestine because of the criminals infesting the region. On the other hand, he recalled his symbolic dream, and with

the eyes of his imagination he seemed to catch a glimpse of the venerable and austere judge prophesying a lifetime full of grief because of his disdain and indifference for the saving truths of Jesus of Nazareth.

Overwrought by the pain of anguished thoughts, Publius bent over his desk and let his wounded pride weep copiously, pondering how helpless he was to cast out the hidden and pitiless forces that were conspiring against his happiness on the gloomy path of his sorrow-filled destiny.

Late that night, he tried to unburden his heart to the loving solicitude of his wife, with both of them exchanging their grief and tears.

"Publius," she said with the habitual tenderness of her heart, "let's try to renew our energies to help ourselves ... All is not lost! ... With the rights we have, we can determine what measures are needed to look for our little angel. We'll postpone our return to Rome indefinitely if we have to, and the gods will do the rest for us when they see our anguish and selflessness.

"We should not give in to irreversible desperation and deplete our last bit of strength for this struggle."

The poor woman had called upon the last resources of her maternal energies to offer those words of hope and consolation. God knew, however, of her unspeakable inner torment during those anguished moments, and only her pure sentiment of selflessness and love could transform her fragility into the strength of comforting her husband's anguished heart in these distressing circumstances.

"Yes, my dear, I shall do everything in my power to hope for the providence of the gods," said the senator, somewhat encouraged by her valiant testimony.

The next day went by with the same anxious expectations and the same confused activity of unfruitful searches.

At night, as promised, Sulpicius Tarquinius appeared to cast his decisive words.

After dinner, which Livia did not attend due to her profound physical debility, Publius received the lictor with great familiarity right there on the triclinium, where both reclined for their usual conversation.

"So, yesterday," the senator addressed his supposed friend, "you stirred my paternal interest by telling me that only today you could convey your personal observations."

"Ah, yes!" replied the lictor, with feigned surprise. "It's very true that I would like to call your attention to some mysterious events of the past few days. Do you have any enemy here in Palestine interested in keeping you in a region that is little adaptable to the habits of a Roman patrician?"

"Not at all," replied the senator, extremely surprised. "I think I'm in an environment of sincere friendship as far as our administrative authorities are concerned, and I don't think anyone has an interest in keeping me away from Rome. I would be most grateful if you would clarify your remarks somewhat."

"It's just that there was a case identical to yours a few years ago over in Judea.

"They say that one of the predecessors of the current governor allowed himself to fall hopelessly in love with the wife of a Roman patrician who had the misfortune of having settled in Jerusalem. When this predecessor had achieved his objectives, he did everything he could to keep his victims from going back to Rome. Noticing that the powers of his authority were worthless, he committed the crime of abducting one of the couple's little sons as well as adding other atrocities to the deed, all of which went unpunished due to his political prestige before the Senate."

Publius listened to these remarks with his mind on fire.

Because of the intensity of his emotions, the blood rushed to his brain, its broad currents seemingly converging on his temples. A waxy pallor covered his face in a ghostly look, as he was unable to define the emotion that assaulted him before these insinuations against his personal dignity and against his honorable family traditions.

In an instant he relived all of Fulvia's accusations, and judging his fellow creatures by the gauge of his own sentiments, he could not accept such a degree of malevolence in Sulpicius's spirit.

While Publius's thoughts fell into an abyss of excruciating suspicions, unable to reply to the lictor, who was fully enjoying the effect of his appalling revelations, the slanderer continued with feigned humility:

"I fully realize the scope of my words, for which I ask the kindness of your discretion. I wouldn't open my heart like this if I hadn't been touched by the deep friendship you have inspired in my dedicated and sincere soul. Frankly, I didn't want to be the bearer of bad news, considering your just and generous spirit; but I will tell you what I saw with my own eyes so as to more surely guide the efforts of your investigation in search of the boy."

And with the false modesty of his poisonous words, Sulpicius Tarquinius unraveled a long string of slanders, interspersing his stories with gulps of wine, which further intensified the prodigious fount of his fantasies.

He told Publius – who listened dumfounded because of the coincidence of Sulpicius's tale with Fulvia's accusations – the most intimate details of the scene in the garden at Pilate's house. Then, he told him what he had seen on the night of the abduction, emphasizing the coincidence of the governor's stay in Nazareth.

The senator listened to Sulpicius's account, hiding with great difficulty his anguished astonishment. His wife's lies – according to that spontaneous accusation - were undeniable. Nonetheless, he wanted to believe the opposite. During their entire married life, Livia had purposely withdrawn from the social scene, living only for him and their beloved children. It was in her discerning and sincere words that his spirit searched for the needed inspiration to succeed in life's struggles. This accusation, however, stunned his heart and annulled all the elements of his former trust. Besides, painful coincidences began to pierce his reasoning, awakening bitter suspicions in the depths of his soul.

Wasn't she the one who had interceded – begged – on behalf of the slaves when they were being punished, as if the guilt for what had happened were also weighing on her heart?

And the day before that, she had suggested that they remain in Palestine, showing uncommon valor. Mightn't this be a gesture of feigned consolation for her affronted husband, when, in fact, she was pursuing unconfessable objectives?

A maelstrom of conflicting ideas collided in his pain-filled mind.

On the other hand, he instantly considered his position as a man of State and his austere responsibilities in the social organism.

His distinguished office, the rigorous obligations to which he had devoted himself in the dynamics of day-to-day relations, and his pride in his family name and traditions all brought together the strength he needed to control the emotions of the moment. Hiding the sentimental man he was by nature and revealing only the public man, he found the will to say:

"Sulpicius, I thank you for your interest, since your words reflect your sincere generosity; but in light of your suspicions about my wife, I must tell you that I cannot accept any argument

that would wound her dignity and strict nobility, attributes that no one should know better than I.

"I myself authorized that conversation in Pilate's garden, and your observations on the night of the abduction are not well-defined, given the unequivocal character that our investigations require.

"So, I thank you for your dedication, but your opinion has created a dividing line between you and me, which my trust will never dare to cross.

"You are thus released from the service that has bound you to my family, now that the possibility of my return to Rome has vanished with the disappearance of my son. We will not be able to return to Rome as long as he is gone – or until we acquire the painful certainty of his death.

"Because of this, it would be unwise for me to continue your services in Capernaum, forgoing the orders of your superiors; you will be dismissed from my house with no scandals that might jeopardize your professional career.

"I will talk to the governor about you at the earliest time possible, and you will be officially dismissed from my service without any prejudice to your name.

"So, as a man of State, I thank you for your interest and I appreciate your dedication, but as a friend it is no longer possible for me to have the same degree of trust in you."

The lictor did not expect such a reply and went pale in his undisguised disappointment; however, he still dared to reply with feigned sincerity:

"Mr. Senator, the time will come when you shall value my zeal not only for having been a servant of your house, but also for having been a devoted and sincere friend. And since you have no better recompense than unjust disdain for my gesture of friendship, it pleases me to be no longer connected with the obligations that have bound me to your authority."

Sulpicius followed with a few words of farewell, to which Publius replied curtly, tormented by the deepest despondency.

In the silence of his office, he considered how much energy the circumstances had demanded of him during these grievous events. He realized that he had adopted the most appropriate attitude toward the lictor in this situation, but deep down he harbored an anguished uncertainty about Livia's conduct. Everything was conspiring against her, tending to present her to his proud husband's heart as the personification of false innocence.

At that time, the "watch and pray" of the eternally sweet teachings of the Christ had not yet spread in the world, and the senator, yielding almost completely to the control of the bitter emotions that afflicted him, hunched over numerous rolls of parchment and began to sob uncontrollably.

VII
Preaching by Lake Tiberias

A few days had elapsed since the facts we have just narrated.

In Capernaum not only the scene but the actors were the same.

Compelled by the senator's irrevocable and unyielding attitude, Sulpicius Tarquinius had returned to Jerusalem at the orders of Pilate, who had received notification directly from Publius Lentulus regarding the lictor's dismissal.

We must not forget that Publius was residing in Palestine with broad powers as an emissary of Caesar and the Senate. All the authorities of the province, including the governor, were obliged to honor him with special attention and the utmost respect.

The procurator of Judea had not neglected, however, to replace Sulpicius in the best way possible. He was very interested in discovering the reasons for the man's dismissal, a matter the senator had decided within his superiority from the political point of view. Pilate helped out with his best efforts in the

investigation as to the whereabouts of little Marcus, activating trusted workers in the endeavor and coming personally to Capernaum to thoroughly familiarize himself with the situation.

The senator welcomed his visit with the highest display of consideration and accepted his cooperation, genuinely comforted that his actions belied the slanderous accusations against his wife.

His domestic life, however, had changed drastically. He was no longer able to experience those hours of happy conversation with his wife. He felt separated from her by a veil of bitter and unending doubt.

In vain he tried many times to recapture his former trust and loving spontaneity.

Furrows of grief creased his habitual lofty and proud countenance, his facial features displaying a cloud of anguished worries.

All of those close to him, including his wife, attributed this strange metamorphosis to the disappearance of his little son.

At the usual mealtimes, he made an obvious effort to dispel his worries.

He would speak to his wife or answer her loving questions in rushed monosyllables, accentuating his words with incomprehensible terseness.

Suffering bitterly from this situation, Livia grew increasingly dismayed as she tried unsuccessfully to find out the reasons for such trials and misfortunes. She often attempted to probe Publius's spirit, to offer him a bit of tenderness and consolation, but he avoided her loving approaches under unyielding pretexts. He would put in an appearance only on the triclinium, and after the meal was over he would leave abruptly for the great hall of archives, where he spent all his time in distressful ponderings.

There was no news of Marcus to give him the slightest glimmer of hope.

On a beautiful morning in Galilee, we find Livia in intimate conversation with her dedicated servant and faithful friend. After being tenderly asked about the state of her health, she replied:

"I feel awful, my good Ana! ... At night my heart beats irregularly, and hour by hour a painful feeling of bitterness grows inside of me. I couldn't really describe this feeling, even if I wanted to ... The disappearance of my little one has filled my soul with dreadful forebodings, increasing the weight of my maternal afflictions when I don't have even the slightest idea as to the cause of such suffering ...

"And now it's Publius's attitude that distresses me most of all. He has always been a pure, loyal and kind man, but for some time now I have noticed odd differences in his temperament. The intensity of unhealthful symptoms has been increasing ever since the incomprehensible disappearance of our little son.

"It seems to me that he has been suffering strong emotional disturbances that have seriously harmed his health."

"I can see how much you are suffering, Ma'am!" said her loving servant. "I know I'm just a humble person worth nothing, but I shall ask God to watch over you at all times and to restore peace to your heart."

"A humble person worth nothing?" said the poor woman, seeking to show her servant the degree of her sincere esteem. "Don't say that. I'm not one of those souls who decide people's worth based on the positions they enjoy or the honors they receive.

"I was the only child of parents who left me a considerable fortune, and I'm a Roman citizen with the privileges of a senator's wife; even so, you can see how much I'm suffering from the bitter struggles of this world.

"The rights that birth bestowed on me haven't been able to shield me from the trials that fate has brought me, despite youth and easy fortune.

"So, you must realize that even though I'm a patrician and you're a servant, our hearts are no different; we share the best sentiment of sisterhood, which opens the door to a tender understanding that is a haven in the sad days of life.

"Contrary to the education I received, in my own mind I've always believed that all people are family, children of a common origin. I'm unable to detect the dividing line between those who have many possessions and titles and those who have nothing in the world except their hearts, because it is there that I find each person's worth in this life."

"Ma'am," said the servant, touched by this most-pleasing surprise, "your words move me, not just because they come from your lips, which I've always listened to with affection and veneration, but also because the prophet of Nazareth has said the very same thing in his sermons."

"Jesus?!" asked Livia with shining eyes, as if that allusion reminded her of a fount of consolation that she had momentarily forgotten.

"Yes, ma'am. And speaking of him, why don't you seek a little comfort in his divine words? I swear to you that his wise and loving words will console you in the midst of all your sorrows and will provide you with the feelings of a new life! ... If you'd like, I could take you to Simeon's house in secret so you could benefit from his loving lessons. That way, you would receive the joy of his blessing without exposing yourself to the criticism of others, and nourish your heart with his enlightened teachings."

Livia thought intensely about this suggestion, which seemed to her a saving providence. Finally, she replied:

"Life's sufferings have often torn my heart to pieces and have caused me to rethink the principles that I have been taught since birth. That is why, in listening to you, I think I should seek Jesus out publicly, just as other women from these parts do.

"It was my intention to look for him before we returned to Rome in order to thank him for Flavia's healing. It was an event that left me profoundly impressed. However, we haven't had the chance to talk about it due to my husband's hostility. Now, forsaken once more, in my seething pain I shall appeal to the prophet in order to obtain relief for my oppressed and tormented heart.

"The wife of a man who now occupies the highest political office in this province, I shall go to Jesus in search of support and consolation as a creature deserted by fate."

"But what about your husband, ma'am?" asked Ana, foreseeing the consequences.

"I'll inform him of my resolution; but if Publius once more avoids my attempt at a more intimate conversation, I shall go anyway without hearing what he has to say on the matter. I'll wear the humble clothing of the simple people of this region. I'll go to Capernaum and stay with your relatives as necessary, and when practical, I want to hear the words of the Messiah with a contrite heart and a soul that feels pity for the misfortunes of my fellow beings.

"I've been feeling very lonely these past few days and I have need of spiritual comfort for my heart, drained by these harsh trials."

"God blesses our good intentions, ma'am. My relatives in Capernaum are very poor and humble, but everyone there holds you in high esteem. Just say the word and they will be at your disposal like slaves."

"For me there is no fortune like that of peace and love. I shall not look for the prophet to ask for any special favors.

His charity has been enough in the case of my daughter, who is healthy and strong today thanks to his mercy. I shall seek only comfort for my afflicted heart.

"I have a feeling that, by listening to his loving and friendly exhortations, I will gain new strength to confront the bitterest and harshest trials.

"I know that he will recognize me in the poor garments of Galilee; however, with his divine intuition he will understand that inside this Roman woman beats an embittered and unhappy heart."

Thus the two made plans to go to the town on the following Saturday afternoon.

In vain, Livia looked for the opportunity to ask for her husband's permission regarding her plan. She tried several times to approach Publius, but his coldness withered her courage before she could ask him.

She had resolved, nevertheless, to look for the Master.

Forsaken in an area where only her husband could have fully understood her at her level of education, and cruelly tested in the most sensitive fibers of her soul as a wife and mother, the poor woman thus decided to proceed with the full assent of her honest and pure conscience.

She fashioned some new clothes that were in conformity with Galilean usage so that she would not stand out in the ordinary crowd at the lakeside sermons. Notifying Comenius of her need to go out that day so that her husband could be informed at dinnertime, on the date previously agreed upon she set out in the company of her trusted servant.

At the humble fishermen's home, where Ana's relatives lived, Livia felt enveloped in vibrations of friendly and sweet serenity. It was as if her dispirited heart had found new clarity in that environment of poverty, humility and tenderness.

The patriarchal figure of old Simeon of Samaria stood out among all those who welcomed her with the most effusive displays of tender kindness. From his deep gaze and venerable white hair emanated a sweet radiation attesting to the wonderful simplicity of the ancient Hebrew people, and his words, anointed with faith, could touch the most sensitive cords of the heart when he told of the prodigious acts of the Messiah of Nazareth.

Welcomed by everyone with sincere sympathy, Livia seemed to be entering a new world, until then unknown in her life. She experienced great comfort from the sincerity and innocence of that simple and humble life, without embellishments or social artifice, but also without prejudices or spiteful pretenses.

In the late afternoon, among the poor and sick who came to receive the blessings of the Lord, we find Livia with a relieved and serene heart, waiting for the fortunate moment to hear a word of love and consolation from the Master.

The dusk of a clear, hot day lent a reflection of golden light to everything and all the soft contours of the landscape. The gentle waters of Lake Tiberias rippled with the afternoon's soft west winds, impregnated with the fragrance of the flowers and trees. Fresh breezes swept the heat away, spreading the pleasing sensation of a free life in the vigorous and abundant bosom of nature.

At last, all eyes were fixed on a dark point on the crystalline mirror of the waters, far off on the horizon.

It was Simon's boat bringing the Master for one of his usual sermons.

In the discomfort of their sufferings, a smile of anticipation and hope lit up all the faces waiting there for him.

Livia observed the crowd, who also noticed her strange presence. There were humble laborers, lowly fishermen,

numerous mothers whose gaunt faces told of bitter stories of the most incredible hardship, people from the unnamed and suffering populace, adulterous women, pleasure-seeking publicans, desperate invalids and numerous children who bore the signs of the most painful destitution.

Livia stood next to old Simeon, whose firm and sweet facial expression inspired the most profound respect in those who approached him, and anyone noticing her delicate Roman profile, wrapped in the simplicity of Galilean clothing, presumed her to be some young woman from Samaria who had also come from afar, attracted by the fame of the Messiah.

Simon's boat gently pulled up to the shore, allowing the Master to head to the customary place of his divine lessons. His face seemed transfigured in resplendent beauty. His hair, as usual, fell to his shoulders in the Nazarene style, fluttering lightly in the caressing kisses of the gentle afternoon winds.

The senator's wife could not take her dazzled eyes off of that simple and wonderful figure.

The Master began a sermon of unmistakable beauty, and his words appeared to touch the most hardened hearts. It seemed as though the sermon resounded all over the boundaries of Galilee, echoing beyond throughout the ages, molded beforehand to carry on in the world along with eternity itself.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for to them belongs the kingdom of my Father in heaven!

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall inherit the earth!

"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled!

"Blessed are they who suffer and mourn, for they shall be comforted in the eternal joy of the kingdom of God!"

His forceful, tender words told of the Heavenly Father's mercy; of earthly and celestial treasures; of the value of human

trials and sorrows, adding that he had come into the world not for the rich and fortunate, but for the consolation of the poor and those deprived of good fortune.

The diverse gathering listened to him, enraptured by his transmission of hope and spiritual joy.

A serene and kindly light seemed to be coming from Hebron[35], illuminating the landscape in ethereal opal and sapphire tones.

It was getting late and some of the Lord's disciples decided to get some bread for those who were most in need of nourishment. Two large baskets for a frugal meal were brought, but there were just too many people. Nevertheless, Jesus blessed the contents of the baskets, and as if by a gentle miracle, the scanty provisions were divided into small pieces, which were faithfully distributed to the hundreds of people.

Livia, too, received her portion, and as she ate it she perceived a different taste, as if she were absorbing a remedy that could cure all the ills of soul and body, and a singular tranquility took over her afflicted and disillusioned heart. Moved to tears, she saw that the Master was kindly assisting numerous women who were known to the people of Capernaum as living dissolute, impious lives.

Old Simeon also wanted to approach the Lord at that memorable moment of his passage on earth. Livia automatically followed him, and in a few minutes they both found themselves before the Master, who welcomed them with his generous and deeply caring smile.

"Lord," the venerable man from Samaria asked respectfully, "what must I do to enter your kingdom some day?"

"Verily I say to you," Jesus responded tenderly, "that many will come from the west and the east looking for the gateways to

[35] City located south of Jerusalem in the Judean hills. – Tr.

Heaven, but only those who deeply love our Father in Heaven above all things on earth, and who love their neighbor as themselves, will find the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

And casting a compassionate and merciful look over the vast gathering, he continued gently:

"Also, many of those who have been called here will be chosen for the great sacrifice to come! ... These will meet me in the heavenly kingdom, for their selflessness will be the salt of the earth and the sun of a new day!"

"Lord," ventured the venerable old man with tear-filled eyes, "I would do anything to be one of your chosen!"

Jesus gazed intently at the Samarian patriarch and murmured with infinite tenderness:

"Simeon, go in peace and do not be too hasty, because, in truth, I will accept your sacrifice when the time comes."

And extending the ray of light from his eyes to the figure of Livia, who took in his words with mesmerized attention, he said with the prophetic clarity of his exhortations:

"And you: rejoice in Our Father, for my words and teaching have touched your heart forever. Go and believe, for the time will come when I shall accept your sanctifying self-sacrifice!"

These words were spoken in such a way that the senator's wife had no difficulty grasping their profound meaning for the distant future.

Little by little, the large crowd of the poor, ill and afflicted dispersed.

It was nighttime when Livia and Ana returned to the manorial house, comforted by the graces received from the kindly hands of the Messiah.

A profound sensation of relief and comfort flooded Livia's soul.

Entering her private quarters, however, she came face-to-face with the stern figure of her husband, displaying intense signs of anger on his overcast face, as was customary when he was in one of his worst moods. She noticed his anger, but unlike other times, she seemed entirely prepared to win the hardest struggles of the heart, because with imperturbable calm she looked him in the face to confront his suspicious gaze. It seemed that the flower of eternal spiritual peace had blossomed within her at hearing the soothing words of Christ, as if she had reached the level of a strange and superior serenity unbeknownst to her until then.

After staring at her from head to toe with his harsh and scrutinizing look, Publius demanded, barely repressing his incomprehensible rage:

"What is this? What irresistible motives would take you away from home at such inappropriate hours for the mother of a family?"

"Publius," she replied humbly, finding his ceremonious treatment strange, "no matter how hard I sought to tell you of my resolution to go out this afternoon, you kept avoiding me. I had to find the Messiah of Nazareth to calm my afflicted heart..."

"So you had to wear a costume to meet the prophet of the people?" interrupted the senator sarcastically. "This is the first time I've seen a patrician woman use such artifice to console her heart. Has your contempt for our most sacred family traditions really gone this far?"

"I didn't think it would be a good idea to call attention to myself in the crowd of poor, unhappy people who were seeking Jesus by the lake. By identifying myself with the sufferers, I didn't mean to disrespect our family customs; instead, I believed I was acting in favor of our name, considering the position you now occupy in the province as the highest political representation of the Empire."

"Unless you are disguising some other sentiment in the same way you feign your social position with those clothes, it was wrong of you to look for the Messiah dressed like that; after all, I have the power to order any person from the region to appear in my home!"

"But Jesus," stated Livia courageously, "must be far above human power, which we know to be so precarious at times. I believe that the cure of our little daughter, before which all our resources were powerless, is enough to make him the creditor of our undying gratitude."

"I didn't realize that your mental stability was so fragile concerning the successes of the Master of Nazareth here in Capernaum," the senator continued harshly.

"Our daughter's cure? How can you assert something you can't prove with positive facts? And even if this man, supposedly endowed with divine powers according to the simple and ignorant Galilean fishermen, had wrought this cure with his supernatural intervention after having come to this world from the gods, we might call him pitiless and cruel for curing a girl who had been sick for so many years, and then allowing the spirits of evil and perversity to snatch away our healthy and loving little boy, upon whose brow my paternal tenderness placed a brilliant and promising future!"

"Be still, Publius!" Livia responded, controlled by a superior strength that kept her heart completely calm. "Remember that the gods can ruthlessly humble our absurd vanity and pride ... If Jesus of Nazareth healed our beloved little daughter, whom we clasped in our fragile arms against the immense powers of death, he could have just as easily allowed us to be touched in the depths of our souls with the inconceivable disappearance of our Marcus so that we would feel inclined toward mercy and compassion for our fellow beings!"

"You are compromising yourself with this exaggerated tolerance, which goes to the absurd extreme of fraternizing with slaves," said Publius with harshness and stern severity. "Such an attitude on your part makes me seriously think that you have changed over the course of this year. Your ideas have dropped far from the social level of Rome to the level of the most lax sentiments. They are unbecoming of the behavior expected from the wife of a senator or a Roman woman."

Livia listened in anguish to her husband's unjustified words. She had never seen him so angry during the whole course of their married life; but she had, in deed, detected a remarkable renewal within herself, as if the rustic bread blessed by the Master had transfigured the most hidden fibers of her consciousness. Her eyes filled with tears, not because of wounded pride or the ingratitude pervading this unjust reproach, but with deep compassion for her misunderstanding husband. Guessing the painful tempest thrashing about in his noble but overbearing heart, she remained serene and silent, and did not try to justify herself before his severe reprimands.

Realizing that the confrontation should not continue, the senator headed for the door. Opening it forcefully, he exclaimed:

"I have never made such a pain-filled and miserable journey! Damnable forces seem to be presiding over my activities in Palestine, because, if I cured a daughter, I lost a little son to the unknown, and I am about to lose my wife in the abyss of imprudence and irrationality. I could end up also losing myself forever."

Saying this, he slammed the door with all the strength of his instinctive reactions and went to his office, while his wife, with kneeling heart, directed her thought toward the caring and tender Jesus, who had come into the world to save all sinners. Pain-filled tears flowed from her eyes as they once more gazed at the landscape of Lake Tiberias, to where she seemed to have gone

back in spirit. There was the Master in a sweet attitude of prayer, his resplendent eyes fixed on the stars in the firmament.

It seemed to her that Jesus also noticed her presence in that somber hour of the night because he turned his effulgent gaze from the starry heavens and extended his compassionate and merciful arms toward her, saying with infinite sweetness:

"Daughter, your eyes weep for the imperfections of the soul that Our Father has destined as a twin to yours! ... Do not expect anything but tears and suffering in this world, because it is in suffering that our hearts gain light for heaven ... A time will come when you will feel yourself at the pinnacle of suffering, but do not doubt my mercy; even though everyone may despise you, I will call you to my kingdom of divine hope, where you shall await your husband in the never-ending course of the centuries!"

It seemed to Livia that the Master was going to continue soothing her heart in sweet and tender promises of heavenly bliss, but a random noise took her away from that vision of indefinable light and happiness.

The scene arising from her spiritual yearning had been broken as if made of very tenuous filigree.

The senator's wife knew that she had not been the victim of a hallucination, and she lovingly stored the sweet words of the Messiah in the core of her heart. While removing the Galilean clothing in order to resume her daily domestic obligations with a clear and comforted soul, she seemed to catch a glimpse of the serene and beloved figure of the Lord in the verdant heights of the shores of Tiberias through the gentle mist that dimmed her eyes moist with tears.

VIII
On the Great Day of Calvary

Ever since the argument with his wife, Publius Lentulus had closed himself off in the most troubling isolation.

Painful suspicions afflicted his impulsive heart concerning the behavior of the woman fate had bound to his spirit forever in the realm of conjugal life. He could not understand the disguise Livia had used for her meeting with the prophet of Nazareth; his proud temperament rebelled against her attitude, as he considered their social position a pledge of the veneration and respect of all. Thus, poisoned by Fulvia's and Sulpicius' calumnies, he harbored the most distressing suspicions.

Some time had passed, and while he cloistered himself off in his muteness and melancholy, Livia took refuge in her faith in the tender and persuasive words of the Nazarene. She had not returned to Capernaum to hear the consoling preaching of

the Messiah; but through Ana, who went there regularly, she used her material resources whenever possible to try to aid the poor people who sought to hear Jesus. Profound sorrow would overcome her sensitive and generous heart whenever she observed her husband's incomprehensible conduct; but she no longer placed her hopes in any fulfillment on the earth and turned her ardent longing toward that wonderful and sublime kingdom of God, where everything exuded love, bliss and peace in the vast realm of heavenly consolations.

Passover of the year 33 was approaching. Several of Publius's friends had advised his temporary return to Jerusalem so that he could intensify the search for his little son in the course of the festivities, which, in those days, concentrated the large crowds of Palestine, thereby providing a better chance to find the missing boy. Countless pilgrims from every region of the province headed to Jerusalem to participate in the festivities and to offer tributes of their faith at the opulent temple. The native nobility could also be seen there through their most representative elements. All the political parties prepared for the extraordinary ceremonies that brought together the largest groups of Judaism, with the most important men of the times all heading to the city. The Roman authorities were also concentrated in the city for the occasion, with the centurions and legionnaires serving the Empire in the farthest parts of the province being stationed there.

Publius Lentulus heeded the suggestion, and before the city had filled with pilgrims and scammers, he was already lodged there with his family, giving instructions to his trusted servants, who knew little Marcus so as to establish a network of attentive eyes for as long as the festivities lasted.

Social conventions had not changed in Jerusalem except that Publius had declined his Uncle Salvius's residence and had

moved into a comfortable and gracious villa in the middle of the city, from where he too could watch the celebrations.

The day before Passover arrived with a voluminous tide of pilgrims of all classes and from all provincial locations. It was interesting to observe the most distinct customs amongst those diverse groups of people.

Countless caravans, displaying the strangest costumes, passed through the gates of the city, patrolled by numerous praetorian soldiers.

And while the senator was making economic, social and political comparisons as he observed the masses of people flowing down the busy streets, we find Livia in private conversation with the servant of her friendship and trust.

"Ma'am, did you know that the Messiah also arrived in the city yesterday?" exclaimed Ana with a ray of joy in her big eyes.

"Really?" asked Livia, surprised.

"Yes, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem yesterday and was greeted by a throng of people.

"Even among the most disbelieving people in this city, the resurrection of Lazarus in Bethany confirmed his divine merit as the Son of God, and I heard that his arrival brought immense joy to everyone. All the windows were decorated with flowers for his triumphal entry, and the children spread green, scented palms in his path in homage to him and his disciples! Many people accompanied the Master from the banks of Lake Gennesaret, following him through all the villages in order to get here.

"I was told about all this by a personal acquaintance of Uncle Simeon, who has also made the long journey to Jerusalem in spite of his advanced age."

"Ana, this is very comforting news," said Livia kindly. "If I could, I'd go hear the Master speak wherever he might be, but you know very well how difficult that would be. But you yourself are

free of your obligations and work during Jesus' stay in Jerusalem so that you can take advantage of the Passover celebrations and hear the Messiah's teachings, always so good to our hearts."

She gave Ana some money for expenses and watched as she left happily for the environs of the Mount of Olives, where dense masses of pilgrims had gathered. Among them was old Simeon of Samaria, the fearless pilgrim who, in spite of his advanced age, did not hesitate to join the pilgrimage down the roughest and longest roads.

At the Lentulus home there was not much interest in the grand festivities of Judaism. A single motive justified the senator's presence in Jerusalem during those turbulent days: the ongoing search for his son, who seemed lost forever.

Each day he listened to his trusted servants after they had conducted their search, and moment by moment he felt increasingly distressed by bitter disillusionment, considering the struggle futile as a result of the exhausting and unfruitful searches.

The hours passed by slowly and sadly at the airy and landscaped villa, despite the bustle of the streets that were patrolled by soldiers and filled with people of every social spectrum. The clamor of the noisy celebrations seeped through those almost silent doors like the fading echoes of distant noises.

The painful marital situation into which he had placed himself separated the senator from his wife. There seemed to be an uncrossable distance between them, the sacred ties of the heart having been destroyed.

It was to this apparently calm refuge that Ana returned on a certain morning a few days later to inform Livia about the unexpected arrest of the Messiah.

With the spontaneous and sincere simplicity of the common soul which she embodied, the humble servant related in utmost detail the scene caused by the ingratitude of one of the

disciples due to the resentment and ambition of the priests and Pharisees of the temple of the great Jewish city.

Bitterly moved by the occurrence, Livia knew that, if things were different, she would immediately call upon the political protection of her husband to stop the attacks of inordinate ambitions against the prophet of Nazareth. Now, however, she realized that under the present circumstances it would not be possible to get assistance by means of her husband's prestige. Even so, she tried to find some way to approach him, albeit fruitlessly. From a room adjoining his office, she watched as Publius met a number of people who discreetly sought him out in private. Interestingly enough, according to what she could tell, all of them related the same matter to the senator, that is, the unexpected arrest of Jesus the Nazarene. It was an event that had diverted all attention from the Passover festivities, such was the interest aroused in every soul by the deeds of the Master. Some asked Publius to intervene in the trial of the accused; others, on the part of the Pharisees connected with the priests of the Sanhedrin, exaggerated the danger of Jesus' preaching. He was described by many of them as being an unwitting revolutionary in opposition to the political powers of the Empire.

In vain, Livia hoped that her husband would grant her just two minutes of his attention in the chambers next to his private office.

Her anxiety reached its peak when she caught a glimpse of the figure of Sulpicius Tarquinius, who had come on behalf of Pilate to ask the senator the favor of his immediate presence at the palace of the provincial government in order to resolve a matter of conscience.

Publius Lentulus obliged.

Pondering his duties as a man of State, he concluded that he should disregard any hindrances arising from his private point

of view regarding the governor, and respond to the obligations he owed the Empire.

Livia lost all hope of imploring his aid for the Master that day. Without knowing why, an intense sorrow overcame her. It was with a soul enveloped in gloom that she lifted her fervent and sincere prayers to the Heavenly Father on behalf of the one her heart considered to be an authentic emissary from Heaven. She begged all the forces of goodness to free the Son of God from the persecution and treachery of men.

Upon arriving at the Roman provincial court on that unforgettable day in Jerusalem, Publius Lentulus was taken by great surprise.

Densely packed throngs of people had gathered in the wide plaza in a deafening uproar.

Pilate received him with deference and solicitude, and led him to a large office where a small number of hand-picked patricians in Jerusalem were meeting. The praetor Salvius, important functionaries, high-ranking military men, and a few Roman civilians who happened to be passing through the city, were gathered there in answer to the governor, who turned to Publius Lentulus and spoke to him in these terms:

"Senator, I do not know if while you were in Galilee you had the opportunity to meet an extraordinary man whom the people call Jesus the Nazarene. This man has just been arrested after having been pronounced guilty by the members of the Sanhedrin, and the same popular masses who had welcomed him with palm branches and flowers are now in the plaza demanding his immediate judgment on the part of the provincial authorities. They want confirmation of the sentence pronounced by the priests of Jerusalem.

"Frankly, I can find no guilt in him at all, except for that of a fervent visionary of things I cannot or do not know how

to comprehend, and his painful state of poverty has surprised me terribly."

At that moment the two sisters, Claudia and Fulvia, entered the room and took their seats in the intimate council of patricians.

"This very night," continued Pilate, pointing to his wife, "it seems that the forewarnings of the gods have manifested to guide me, because Claudia dreamed that a voice told her that I should not risk any responsibility in the judgment of this righteous man.

"So I decided to act in all conscience, and gathered all the notable patricians and Romans of Jerusalem here so that my actions would not jeopardize the interests of the Empire nor collide with my ideal of justice.

"What would you say, then, of my scruples in my capacity as a direct representative of the Senate and the Emperor?"

"Your attitude," replied the senator, aware of his responsibilities, "reveals the utmost discernment when it comes to administrative matters."

And remembering the blessings he himself had received with the healing of his little daughter, and despite the doubts of his pride and vanity, he continued:

"I myself met the prophet of Nazareth up close in Capernaum. No one there thought of him as a conspirator or revolutionary. His actions there were those of a superior man, charitable and just, and I never heard anyone say that he spoke against any social or political institution of the Empire. Of course, some have seen him as a claimant to the political authority of Judea, focusing the ambitions and spite of the temple priests on his name. Since you have your doubts, why don't you send the prisoner to be judged by Antipas? He has more propriety in a matter like this and would surely be interested in finding a solution. Herod represents the government of Galilee here in

Jerusalem, and I don't think there is anyone better than him to resolve a case like this in clear conscience, considering that he would be judging a fellow countryman, and since you don't think you have all the elements to pronounce a decisive sentence in this unusual case."

This idea was unanimously accepted, and the accused was taken to Herod Antipas by some centurions, who followed Pilate's orders to the letter.

In the palace of the Tetrarch of Galilee, however, Jesus of Nazareth was received with profound sarcasm.

Nicknamed "King of the Jews" by the simple folk and symbolizing the political hopes of a number of his followers – among them the famed disciple of Iscariot – the Master of Nazareth was treated by the prince of Tiberias as a common conspirator, humiliated and defeated.

Moreover, in order to show the Procurator just how little he thought of his scruples, Antipas ordered the prisoner to be treated with the utmost mockery.

Dressing him in a white tunic like those worn by the princes of the time, placing in his arms a filthy reed to represent a scepter, and crowning his saddened brow with a wreath of poisonous thorns, he sent him back to Pilate in a maelstrom of shouts from the overexcited mob.

A large number of Roman soldiers surrounded the accused to protect him from the onslaught of the ferocious and insensible crowd.

Jesus, mockingly dressed in the royal tunic, crowned with thorns and holding the reed as a symbol of his kingdom in the world, displayed an indefinable melancholy in his penetrating eyes.

When the governor was informed that the prisoner had been returned by Antipas for his judgment, he turned again to his countrymen, exclaiming:

"Well, my friends, despite our efforts, Herod also has turned to us to confirm the condemnation of the Nazarene prophet. He has returned him with his situation painfully worsened in the eyes of the people, since, as the supreme authority in Tiberias, he treated the prisoner with despicable sarcasm, giving us to understand the disdain with which he thinks he should be viewed by our justice and administration. This dire situation saddens me greatly, because my heart tells me that this man is innocent; but what can we do in such a case?"

The noisy echoes of the unruly mob's dreadful shouting could be heard from the isolated chamber where the hurried and reduced council of patricians had gathered.

A sensible and honest man named Polibius, a military aid to the governor, entered the room, pale and almost trembling, addressing Pilate:

"Mr. Governor, the infuriated crowd is threatening to storm the place if you do not confirm the condemnatory sentence of Jesus the Nazarene as soon as possible."

"That's absurd," replied Pilate, upset. "What is the prophet himself saying under such circumstances? Is he suffering through the whole thing without a word of recrimination and without an official appeal to the courts of justice?"

"Your Excellency," replied Polibius, equally impressed, "the prisoner's serenity and resignation are extraordinary. He allows himself to be led by his tormentors with the docility of a lamb and complains of nothing, not even the utmost abandonment in which nearly all the beloved disciples of his doctrine have left him!

"I was moved by his suffering, and so I spoke with him personally. When I asked about his afflictions, he said he could invoke legions of angels and lay waste to all of Jerusalem in a minute if he wanted to, but that was not in the divine plan; instead, the divine plan called for his defaming humiliation so

that the mandates of the Scriptures could be fulfilled. I told him that he could turn to your magnanimity and demand a proceeding within our judicial system to prove his innocence, but he refused, alleging that he was ignoring all human political protection and was trusting only in a justice that he says is of his Father in heaven!"

"What an extraordinary man!" replied Pilate, while the others followed the conversation in disbelief.

"Polibius," he continued, "what can we do to avoid his atrocious death at the criminal hands of the insensible crowds?"

"Your Excellency, considering the need for a quick resolution, I suggest punishment by lashing in the public square. Let's see if that appeases the people's rage and spares the prisoner a shameful death at the hands of unconscionable rogues."

"Lashing?!" said Publius Lentulus in surprise, anticipating the torture of such a horrible ordeal.

"Yes, my friend," answered the governor, addressing him with respectful deference, "Polibius's idea is worth considering. We could use this strategy to avoid a shameful death for the accused. Having lived in Judea for nearly seven years, I know these people and their terrible behavior once their passions are unleashed."

The torture was then ordered under the supposition of avoiding an even greater evil.

Before everyone, Jesus was flogged ruthlessly to the raucous bellowing of the frenzied crowd.

Publius and some of the Romans left the private chamber for a few moments in order to observe the instinctive reaction of the fanatical and ignorant mob. It did not seem that the pilgrims of Jerusalem had gathered in the city for the joyous Passover celebrations, but only to proceed with the conviction of the humble Messiah of Nazareth. From time to time the firm action

of fearless centurions brandishing rusty old swords was needed to disperse some of the most hot-tempered groups.

The senator made it a point to approach the tormented man in his painful, final trial.

That strong and gentle face, around which his eyes had observed a halo of soft and merciful light on the shores of Lake Tiberias, was now bathed in bloody sweat pouring down his thorn-pierced forehead and mixed with dolorous tears; his delicate facial features seemed to have been taken over by an anguished, indescribable pallor; his hair fell in the same enchanting way over his semi-naked shoulders, but was now in disarray from the ignominious crown. His body shuddered with each lash of the whip, but his penetrating look was saturated with the same inexpressible and mysterious beauty, revealing a sorrowful and indefinable melancholy.

For an instant Jesus' eyes met those of the senator, who lowered his head, touched by the imperishable impression of that superhuman majesty.

Contrite, Publius Lentulus went back inside the palace. Polibius returned a few minutes later to advise the governor that the punishment of the lash, unfortunately, had not satiated the anger of the infuriated mob. They were now demanding the crucifixion of the condemned man.

Painfully surprised, the senator asked Pilate confidentially:

"Don't you have some other convicted prisoner who could replace the prophet in these terrible punishments? Crowds are fickle and erratic, and it is quite possible that this one here today would be satisfied with the crucifixion of some other criminal in the place of this man, who may be a magician or visionary, but a charitable and righteous man just the same."

The governor of Judea thought hard for a few moments, calling upon his memory for the desired solution.

Remembering Barabbas, a fearsome character, known and hated by everyone for his proven perversity, was in jail waiting for his final punishment. Pilate replied:

"Well, yes! ... There is a criminal who, to everyone's relief, is in jail. He could in fact replace the prophet in this humiliating death!"

And demanding as much silence as possible from one of the building's balconies, he ordered the people to choose between the criminal and Jesus.

To everyone's great surprise, the crowd roared with ominous clamor, in a torrent of insulting words:

"Jesus! ... Jesus! ... We acquit Barabbas! ... We convict Jesus! ... Crucify him! ... Crucify him!"

The Romans went to the windows to observe the mob's insensibility under their unleashed instincts.

"What can we do in light of such a situation?" the puzzled Pilate asked the senator, who listened to him attentively.

"My friend," answered Publius vehemently, "if it were up to me alone, I would turn to our judicial codes. They have developed enough to no longer carry a summary condemnation such as this one. I would order the unconscionable crowd to be dispersed under the hooves of horses; but I feel that my transitory privileges in your government do not grant me the right to such extremes. Besides, you have seven years of experience. As for me, I believe that everything has been done to avoid a hasty decision.

"First of all, the prisoner was sent to be judged by Antipas, but he complicated the situation before this irresponsible mob with his unfortunate notions of a government's duties, leaving you with the responsibility of the last word on the matter. Then, you settled on the lash as a punishment to satisfy the unruly horde, and finally, you recommended another criminal for crucifixion in the place of the accused – all uselessly.

"As a man, I am against this unconscionable and wretched people and would do anything to save an innocent; but as a Roman I believe that a province such as this one is no more than an economic unit of the Empire. We have no right to interfere in its major moral problems, and so I believe the responsibility of this atrocious death must now fall exclusively on this ignorant and desperate mob and the ambitious and selfish priests who rule it."

Pilate buried his face in his hands, as if to reflect judiciously on these well-considered statements; but before he was able to express his opinion, a distressed Polibius appeared, saying discreetly:

"Mr. Governor, you must hurry your decision. Egged on by the intrigue of the temple priests, malevolent individuals are beginning to doubt your fidelity to the powers of Caesar and are placing your dignity in a suspicious light for everyone ... Moreover, the mob is trying to storm the place, making it necessary for you to take a decisive attitude without wasting another minute."

Pilate, reddened with anger at such injunctions, exclaimed as if he were under the yoke of the most unusual determinism:

"Fine! I wash my hands of this shameful ordeal! The people of Jerusalem shall be satisfied."

And proceeding with an act that would make him remembered forever, he directed a few words to the condemned man and then ordered him to be taken to a cell where he could remain for a few moments without the uncouth onslaughts of the impetuous mob before being led to Golgotha, which in common language would be translated as "The Place of the Skull."

A blazing sun had turned the atmosphere muggy and unbearable. With the fury of the crowd finally satiated in their wretched madness, numerous soldiers accompanied the prisoner as he headed toward the mount of crucifixion with wavering steps

under the infamous cross that the justice of that time reserved for bandits and thieves.

Up until the moment he left bearing the cross, no one showed an interest in Jesus before the authority of the governor of Judea.

From this, the senator concluded that the many who had followed the Master of Nazareth on the shores of the lake in Capernaum had forsaken him entirely.

Watching the undulation of the infuriated mob from one of the palace windows as the unforgettable procession was leaving, he was filled with pity as he pondered the scorn inflicted upon that man who had once overpowered him with the magnetic force of his incomprehensible personality.

At the Master's side, one no longer saw the loving care of his disciples and numerous followers. Only a few women – among whom the impressive and agonizing figure of his mother stood out – supported him tenderly in his painful and final ordeal.

Little by little, the vast plaza became quiet in the suffocating heat of the approaching afternoon.

In the distance one could still hear the uproar of the mob, mixed with the neighing of the horses and the clanking of armor.

Impressed by the spectacle, which, however, was not uncommon in Palestine, the Romans met in one of the large rooms of the governmental palace to engage in animated conversation, commenting on the ferocious instincts and passions of the infuriated crowd.

Claudia requested sweets, wine and fruit to be served, and while the conversation centered around the problems of the province and the intrigues of the court of Tiberius, little did that handful of individuals imagine that on the crude and humble cross of Golgotha, a glorious light was about to be lit for all earthly centuries.

IX
Slander Victorious

Jesus of Nazareth may have been abandoned by his disciples and closest followers, but the same could not be said of the large number of humble folk who followed him with purified and sincere devotion.

It is true that these few souls did not openly show their sympathies in front of the wild mob out of fear of their destructive rage, but a number of pious souls such as Ana and Simeon witnessed up close the Lord's suffering under the infamous whip, their eyes filled with anguished tears in the hope that at any moment God's justice would manifest on behalf of the Messiah against the wickedness of men.

Their last hopes, however, vanished when, under the weight of the cross, Jesus staggered up the mount of final insult after the confirmation of his ignoble sentence.

When they realized that Jesus' martyrdom by crucifixion was inevitable, Ana and her uncle decided to go to Publius's residence to beg Livia to get help from the governor.

As the grim, impressive procession slowly began its march, they left the crowd and headed along a sunny pathway in hopes of receiving the desired help.

While Simeon patiently waited for her on a nearby sidewalk, Ana entered the house and approached the senator's wife, who, surprised and distressed, greeted her.

"Ma'am," she said, barely hiding her tears, "the prophet of Nazareth is on his way to a shameful death on the cross between two thieves!"

Strong emotion flooded her tear-choked voice.

"How can that be?" replied Livia, painfully surprised, "if he was arrested just a few hours ago?"

"But it is true," explained the heart-stricken servant. "And in the name of all the afflicted you saw at the lake receiving consolation through his loving and caring words, my uncle Simeon and I have come to beg for your personal help before the governor so that we can make a last ditch effort on the Messiah's behalf!"

"Can a person actually be convicted like that with no formal trial? Do these people live with no law other than barbarism?" Livia exclaimed, visibly appalled by the unexpected news. Wishing to keep Livia from wasting any time, Ana insisted with decisiveness and sorrow:

"Ma'am, we don't have a minute to lose."

"Before I can do anything, I need to consult my husband first," the senator's wife thought to herself, suddenly remembering her marital duties.

Where could Publius be? He hadn't come home since morning after Pilate's urgent call. Could he have taken part in the Messiah's conviction? In a flash the poor woman evaluated

the situation in all its details, including the infinite blessings she had received from the charitable and caring hands of the Nazarene Master. As if illuminated by a higher power that made her forget all of earth's transitory matters, she said with heroic decisiveness:

"All right, Ana, I shall go with you to ask Pilate to protect the prophet. Give me a minute while I put on the Galilean clothes I wore that afternoon in Capernaum. That way I can go to the governor without attracting the attention of the mob."

Minutes later – without measuring the consequences of her desperate action – Livia was dressed once more in the simple clothing of Galilee's poor, and was on the street with the old man from Samaria and his niece, all three trying to ascertain in their anguish the unfolding of the grievous events.

As she approached the seat of the provincial government, Livia's heart began to pound and she began to have second thoughts. Wasn't she being foolhardy for seeking the governor without telling her husband first? But hadn't she tried in vain to approach her distant and angry husband in order to regain his trust? And what about Pilate? She still remembered the bitter encounter of that night when he had spoken frankly of the regrettable feelings she had inspired in him. Livia hesitated as she was about to enter one of the corners of the large square, now quiet under a sun as scorching as live embers.

Her reason contradicted the decision she had made in response to her servant's pleas, which represented to her the desperate supplication of countless unfortunate souls. Her heart, however, fully sanctioned this final effort on behalf of the heavenly emissary who had healed her little girl's affliction. Her heart was filled with unalterable serenity, the heart of a wife and mother tormented so many times for being misunderstood. Moreover, in that inner conflict between reason and sentiment, the latter reminded her that Jesus had spoken to her on the banks of the

lake about the bitter sacrifices she would have to make for his great cause. Mightn't this be a sacred time to show the gratitude of her ardent faith and to bear witness to her acknowledgement? Reassured by the inner contentment of fulfilling her loving duty, she proceeded fearlessly, leaving her companions waiting for her in one of the large corners of the square. Displaying assured confidence, she sought access to the environs of the building.

Her heart was pounding.

How could she find the governor of Judea at that time of day? The burning sun focused its intolerable and suffocating heat upon everything.

The procession on its way to Golgotha had left nearly an hour ago, and the palace was now immersed in an atmosphere of silence and slumber after the dreadful chaos of that day.

Only a few centurions were guarding the building, and when Livia crossed the short distance from the main access doors to the inside, she noticed the figure of Sulpicius. She approached him with utmost trust and innocence, and asked him the favor of an immediate, private audience with the governor in her name so that she could speak to him about the dolorous situation of Jesus of Nazareth.

The lictor looked her up and down with his characteristic lascivious and lewd gaze. He believed wholeheartedly in the illicit relationship between this woman and the Procurator of Judea, based on his personal observations arising from the coincidences he imagined were the perfect proof of that supposed transgression. Thus, he assumed that she had not come there for the reason she claimed; rather, it was an excellent pretext for meeting the man of her preference without raising any suspicions.

An ignoble individual who was used by the governor as an ally for his degrading passions, Sulpicius realized that this meeting should take place in the greatest intimacy. He knew that

Publius Lentulus was still there in animated conversation, so he led Livia to a scented private office that was lined with precious vessels of perfumes from the Orient, saturating it with subtle and dizzying fragrances. It was there that Pilate sometimes received furtive visits from women of dubious conduct to take part in his licentious pleasures.

Completely unaware that the circumstances were leading her into a dreadful situation, Livia followed the lictor into the room. Although she found the extravagant sumptuousness quite strange, she lingered there alone for a few minutes, waiting anxiously to personally beg the procurator of Judea for his prestigious intervention on behalf of the kind Messiah of Nazareth.

Neither she nor Sulpicius had noticed that a pair of inquisitive eyes had followed them with acute interest from outside the building to the private quarters.

It was Fulvia. She knew about that private room in the palace, and recognizing the senator's wife in the disguise of a humble tunic of rural life, her dreadful jealousy at this unexpected visit filled her heart.

Sulpicius signaled to Pilate, and the governor immediately left the others to meet him in a wide hallway, where they talked discretely about Livia's request for a private meeting. Meanwhile, the cunning woman entered an alcove so that from behind its drapes she could confirm that Livia was indeed waiting for the governor in his private chamber, the place he used for his licentious encounters.

With her suspicions confirmed, the slanderer relished the moment when she would lead Publius by the hand to where he would have a direct view of his wife's supposed adultery. Smiling slightly in sinister satisfaction as she returned to the large hall, she could hear Pilate politely saying to his guests:

"My friends, I hope you will allow me a few minutes to attend to a private and urgent meeting I was not expecting at this time. I think that maybe with the conviction of the Messiah of Nazareth, those who did not have the courage to defend him publicly when they had the chance are now knocking at my door! ... We shall see!"

Everyone gave their assent and the governor left for the room, where he was greatly surprised to find the noble figure of Livia, who looked even more beautiful and seductive in those unpretentious and simple clothes. She addressed him in these terms:

"Mr. Governor, even though I did not get my husband's permission first, I decided to come here because of the urgency of the matter to ask for your political support for the absolution of the prophet of Nazareth. He is a humble and good man, charitable and just. What wrong could he have done to die a degrading death like this between two thieves? I know him personally and consider him to be an inspiration from heaven, and that is why I would dare invoke your high position as a public man on behalf of the accused!"

Her voice was trembling, revealing the emotions in her soul.

"Madam," replied Pilate, trying his best to touch and seduce her heart with the feigned tenderness of his words, "I laid aside all my scruples as a man of government and did everything I could to prevent Jesus' death on the infamous cross; unfortunately, it is done. Our laws yielded to the anger of the ferocious mob in their unjustified and incomprehensible hatred."

"But isn't there anything else that can be done for this charitable and just man, condemned as an ordinary criminal? Is he to be crucified for the crime of practicing charity and planting faith in the hearts of his fellow beings, who do not yet know how to acquire it for themselves?"

"Unfortunately, that's the way it is," replied Pilate, embarrassed. "We did everything we could to stave off the madness of the unruly mob, but I wasn't able to impose my principles. Against my will, I was obliged to confirm Jesus' punishment."

Livia yielded momentarily to her grieving thoughts, as if asking herself if there was anything else she could do without wasting any time.

The governor paused for a moment and allowed his male instincts to fully emerge.

It had been a day of arduous and intense strain. An odd physical debility had overcome him, but right there before his eyes stood the woman who had resisted him. He was used to getting his way and he could be very cruel about it if necessary. Powerful shackles seemed to bind him to her simple and loving personality, and now, more than ever, he wanted to possess her, and like so many others before her, make her an instrument of his fleeting passions. The atmosphere contributed particularly to cloud his reasoning. That room was meant exclusively for his nighttime trysts, and the intoxicating atmosphere penetrated all senses and dulled the noblest thoughts.

In his desire he gazed at the woman; she seemed lost in graceful contemplation for a few seconds in his domineering presence.

Filled with an almost childlike generosity combined with the limpid and profound gaze of an honorable woman, her simple elegance overshadowed his gentlemanliness, which appeared at times in spite of the brusque manner of his injustices and cruelties as a man of both private and public life.

Taking a step toward her as if overcome by an uncontrollable force, he spoke unexpectedly, alerting her to the danger in which she had gotten herself:

"Honorable Livia," he began, in the restlessness of his impure thoughts, "I have never forgotten that music and star-

filled night when I revealed the fervor of my impassioned heart to you for the first time ... Forget about these mystifying Jews for a moment and heed once more the sincerity of the profound sentiments you have inspired in me with your virtue and uncommon beauty!"

"Sir!" the poor woman found the strength to exclaim, trying to parry the affront.

But with the daring of impetuous men, the governor had no choice except to obey his impulsive urges and impertinently took hold of her hands.

Livia, however, gathered all her strength and was able to break free of his long, powerful arms, retorting bravely:

"Step back, Sir! Is this the kind of treatment a man of State gives a Roman citizen and the wife of an illustrious senator of the Empire? Even if I lacked all the titles that should dignify me in your shameful and ruthless eyes, I would think that at a time like this you would not overstep the duty and respect that a man should show a woman!"

Used to the most advanced techniques of seduction, the governor stopped short before that heroic and unexpected gesture.

The resistance of the coveted woman incited all the more his desire to conquer her noble pride and incorruptible virtue.

In the maelstrom of the lasciviousness and sensuality clouding his reason, he was overcome by the impulse to fling himself at that delicate and fragile creature; however, an overwhelming force seemed to impose itself on his perilous desire, paralyzing his strength to act it out.

Meanwhile, the senator's wife gazed at him with grief-stricken eyes, displaying the extent of her suffering and contempt for the affront. Deeply disturbed, she turned to leave, her mind burning with bewildering thoughts.

Before we see Livia leaving the room, however, we must go back a few minutes to the point when Fulvia asks Publius for a word in private in order to tell him her version of the events.

The senator felt a terrible jolt as he deduced that his wife's immoral behavior was about to be confirmed before his very eyes, despite his reluctance to believe such villainy.

"Livia, here?" he sullenly asked his uncle's wife, giving the impression by the tone of his voice that he thought it to be criminal slander.

"Yes!" exclaimed Fulvia, eager to provide him with tangible proof. "She's talking to the governor in one of his private chambers, but I'm not sure what the situation and circumstances of their meeting might be; after all, Claudia still lives here. In the eyes of the law, my sister is Pilate's real wife, but he has hardly abandoned the dissolute customs of the Court from whence he was sent here because of serious incidents of this very sort!"

Publius Lentulus's eyes opened wide in naivety. He harbored the most horrible sentiments and was poisoning himself with the venom of the bitterest mistrust in light of all the circumstances working against his wife, although he was trying to deal with the matter using the vast resources of his tolerance and liberality.

His attitude displayed the greatest disbelief about the accusations, but noticing his distraught silence, the slanderer quickly and eagerly added:

"Senator, follow me and I'll give you the key to the mystery so that with your own eyes you can witness your wife's conduct."

"Have you gone mad?" he asked with frightful calmness. "Unless granted such trust, the head of a family of our social rank must not intrude on the domestic intimacies of a house other than his own."

Realizing that her trick had failed, Fulvia replied with the same assurance:

"All right, since you are unwilling to compromise your principles, let's just take a look out of one of those windows. You will see that I'm telling the truth when Livia comes out of one of the palace's private rooms."

And practically taking Publius by the hands – such was the mental collapse that had come over him – the praetor's wife approached a nearby windowsill, followed by the senator, who stumbled after her.

No more arguments were needed to convince him.

From Fulvia's favorite observation spot, in a few seconds they saw the door of the room open and Livia exit in her Galilean disguise, her face revealing the obvious signs of her emotions, as if she wanted to flee a situation that grievously distressed her.

Publius Lentulus felt like his soul had been torn to pieces forever. In a flash he realized he had lost his entire social and political heritage, along with the most sacred aspirations of his heart. In light of his wife's conduct, which he considered an indelible shame that had blackened his name forever, he believed himself to be the most unfortunate of men. All of his dreams were now dead and all of his hopes were lost. A man's wife represents the sacred foundation of all his accomplishments in the struggles of life, and Publius felt that this foundation was crumbling beneath him, unhinging his mind and heart.

Nonetheless, in the turmoil of his overexcited imagination, filled with ghosts mocking his false happiness, he glimpsed the soft and tender features of his little children silently looking at him. One of them was wandering about in the unknown, but his daughter expected his fatherly affection and would from now on become his reason for living and the strength of all his hopes.

"Well, what do you have to say now?" exclaimed a triumphant Fulvia, startling him from his pain-filled silence.

"You win!" he answered dryly, his voice choked with emotion.

With a look of utmost composure, he returned to the wide hall with heavy, silent steps to say a heroic goodbye to his friends with the excuse of having a mild headache.

"Senator, wait just a bit; the governor hasn't returned from his private rooms yet," one of the patricians exclaimed.

"Thank you very much!" said Publius sternly, "but my dear friends will have to forgive my insistence and offer my farewells and thanks to our generous host."

And without further delay, he ordered the litter in which the strong arms of slaves would take him back home; he needed to find a little rest for his heart, tortured by grievous and unforgettable emotions.

As the deeply troubled senator is leaving, let us follow Livia on her way back to the plaza to notify her friends of her futile attempt.

Profound bitterness afflicted her heart.

In her naive and trusting kindness, she had never imagined that the procurator of Judea could receive her plea with such indifference and irreverence for her condition as a woman.

She tried to recover from these emotions as she approached Ana and her uncle, since it behooved her to hide her disgust deep within her.

Back with her humble companions in faith, she gave way to her anguish, saying sorrowfully:

"Ana, unfortunately all is lost! The sentence has been carried out and there is no other recourse! ... The loving prophet of Nazareth will never return to Capernaum to bring us his gentle and benevolent consolations! ... Today's cross will be this world's reward for his boundless goodness!"

The eyes of all three were wet with tears.

"May the will of our Father in heaven be done," said her servant, breaking into sobs.

"Dear daughters," said the old man from Samaria with a profound, clear gaze fixed on the sky, where the rays of the burning sun were blazing, "the Messiah never hid the truth about the sacrifice, the martyrdom that awaited him so that he could teach us that his kingdom is not of this world! In the shadow of my old age, I can grasp the great truth of his words, for honors and vainglories, youth and fortune, the passing joys of the earthly plane are worth nothing; everything here is an illusion that disappears in the abysms of pain and time ... The only tangible reality is that of our soul making its way to that marvelous kingdom, whose beauty and light were brought to us through his unforgettable and loving lessons."

"But," replied Ana in tears, "we will never see Jesus of Nazareth again to comfort our hearts!"

"What are you saying, my child!" said Simeon resolutely. "Don't you know that the Master assured us that his consoling presence would continue among those who gather in his name now and forever? When I go back to Samaria, I will put a cross on the door of our hut, and there I will gather a community of believers who want to continue the loving traditions of the Messiah."

And after a pause in which he seemed to awaken under the weight of his pungent concerns, he stressed:

"We have no time to lose ... We must go to Golgotha ... to receive Jesus' blessings one more time!"

"I would love to go with you," replied Livia, deeply affected, "but I must hurry home, where my responsibilities toward my daughter are waiting for me. I know you will forgive my absence, for I shall be at the Master's cross in thought,

thinking about his martyrdom and unspeakable suffering ... My soul will accompany that indescribable death. May our Father in heaven grant us the strength we need to courageously bear this wrenching ordeal!"

"Please go, Ma'am, for your duties as a wife and mother are also sacred," said Simeon tenderly.

And while the old man and his niece began climbing the public roads that led to Calvary, Livia hurried home, seeking the shortest way down the narrow alleys so that she could return as quickly as possible, not just due to the unexpected circumstance of having gone out into the street in different clothes because of the demands of the moment, but also due to the inexplicable anguish that was tearing her heart, making her feel a strong need for prayer and meditation.

Arriving home, she first changed into her usual tunic and then looked for a quiet corner in her private rooms to pray fervently to the Father of infinite mercy.

A few minutes later she heard the familiar noises announcing the return of her husband, who withdrew to his private office, slamming the door.

She then remembered that from her house it was possible to see the Golgotha in the far distance, so she sought a corner of the window from where she might see the heartrending sufferings of the Master of Nazareth. Finding the right spot, she observed the large gathering of people on top of the mount as the three famous crosses were lift up on that unforgettable day.

The hill was barren, without beauty, and across the distance her eyes could glimpse the dusty paths and the desolate and arid landscape under a burning sun.

Livia prayed with all the poignant intensity of her soul, overwhelmed by anguished thoughts.

The gentle and enchanting scenes of the Sea of Galilee appeared to her spiritual sight, and she recalled the unforgettable twilight when, surrounded by humble and suffering people, she had waited for the sweet moment to hear the comforting words of the Messiah for the first time. She also recalled Simon's rugged boat leaning against the sweet flowers on the bank, while the white lace of sea-spray kissed the light-colored pebbles on the beach ... Jesus was there, amid the crowd of desperate and disillusioned people, with his tender and penetrating eyes...

However, the cross being raised on Mt. Calvary plunged her heart into sorrowful musings.

After praying and meditating at length, she focused on the three crosses from afar and thought she could hear the clamor of the criminal mob standing next to the Master's cross and shouting terrible insults.

Suddenly, she felt touched by a wave of indefinable consolation. It seemed that the stifling Jerusalem air was filled with indescribable, melodious vibrations. Enraptured, she saw through the eyes of her spirit that the great cross of Calvary was surrounded by numerous lights.

In the uncommon heat of that day, dark clouds had gathered in the atmosphere, foretelling a storm. In just a few minutes, the entire celestial canopy was filled with thick darkness. Livia saw that between heaven and earth a long pathway had opened up, on which legions of graceful, winged beings were descending toward Golgotha. Thousands of them gathered around the Master's cross and seemed to transform it into a fount of everlasting, radiant light.

Attracted by that immense beam of resplendent light, she felt that her soul had detached from her physical body and was being transported to the summit of Calvary so that she could offer Jesus one last token of her devotion. Yes! She was

now seeing the Messiah of Nazareth surrounded by his bright messengers and powerful legions of angels. She never imagined seeing him so sanctified and so beautiful, with his eyes fixed on the firmament, as in a vision of glorious bliss.

Touched by his wondrous light and insulated from all the noise around her, she contemplated him, imploring him for strength, resignation, hope and mercy.

At a particular moment, her spirit was overcome by an indefinable consolation. As if she were touched by the greatest joy of her life, she noticed that the Master had turned his gaze slightly, resting it on her in a wave of indescribable love and luminous tenderness. In the final torments of death, those serene and merciful eyes seemed to say to her: "My child, wait for the eternal light of my kingdom, because on earth this is how we all must die!"

She wanted to answer the Messiah's gentle exhortations, but her heart was flooded with a wave of radiant spirituality. Nevertheless, she affirmed within, as if she were telling herself: "Yes, this is how we must die! ... Jesus, grant me the courage, resignation and hope to fulfill your teachings, to one day reach your kingdom of love and righteousness!"

Copious tears rolled down her face in that beatific and wonderful vision.

Just then, the door opened loudly and her husband's taciturn and desperate voice rang out in the stuffy air, arousing her abruptly and tearing her away from her consoling visions.

"Livia!" he shouted, as if he were afflicted by crucial and desperate troubles.

After returning home, Publius Lentulus had headed immediately to his office, where he remained for a long time, engulfed in excruciating thoughts. Having let the most conflicting resolutions churn back and forth in his mind, he

remembered that he should entreat the mercy of the gods in his painful predicament. He went to the domestic altar where the inanimate symbols of his family divinities lay, but whereas Livia had received precious comfort by accepting the teachings of Jesus in her heart through forgiveness, humility and the practice of goodness, the senator sought clarification and consolation in vain, offering his prayers at the feet of the impassive and proud statue of Jupiter. He entreated the inspiration of his household divinities to no avail, because they were the embodied tradition of the imperialism of his nation, a tradition that consisted of vanity, pride, selfishness and ambition.

And so it was that, intoxicated with jealousy, he went looking for his wife without further ado to spit all the disdain of his bitter desperation in her face.

As he brusquely called her, he saw that her half-closed eyes were filled with tears, as if she were contemplating some spiritual vision inaccessible to his view. Livia had never seemed so spiritualized and beautiful to him as in that moment, but the demon of slander made him immediately sense that her weeping was nothing more than a sign of remorse and contrition for the wrong she had committed. She must have been aware of his presence in the governmental palace and must have concluded the possibility of severe punishment.

Torn from her ecstasy by her husband's resounding voice, the poor woman saw her vision disappear at once, and that the Jerusalem sky had been overcome by an intense darkness with formidable claps of thunder in the distance, while terrible lightning shot across the atmosphere in every direction.

"Livia," said the senator in a strong and measured voice, revealing his effort to control his complex emotions, "tears of repentance are useless at this painful moment in our destinies, because all the bonds of the love we used to share are now broken forever."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, revealing the shock that those words aroused in her.

"Not another word," retorted the senator, red with rage behind a cruel and unforgiving calmness. "I witnessed your heinous offence with my own eyes and now I know the reason for your humble Galilean disguises ... You shall hear me out and not try to justify what you have done, for a betrayal such as yours can find its just punishment only in the profound silence of death.

"But I do not want to slay you. My moral training is not compatible with such a crime; not because there is mercy in my soul in light of the possibility of your repentance at the opportune time, but because I still have a daughter who would suffer from my gesture of cruelty against your treachery, which is enough by itself to make us unhappy for the rest of our lives.

"As an honest man ready to avenge myself of any affront, I have a great deal of love for my name and my family traditions, so I will not make myself a heartless and criminal father.

"Considering your act of extreme disloyalty, I could abandon you forever, but even the servants in this house eat at my table; moreover, without acknowledging the other ties that used to bind me to you in domestic intimacy, you are still the mother of my unfortunate children. Therefore, in view of the tangible proof of your dishonesty on this baneful day of my life, I shall henceforth scorn your unworthy character and shall tolerate you only as a mother, a condition I have come to respect in even the humblest of irrational animals."

The imploring eyes of the slandered woman displayed the unspeakable torment tearing her loving and sensitive heart apart.

She humbly knelt at her husband's feet as sorrowful tears rolled down her pale cheeks.

Livia remembered Jesus in his inexpressible suffering. Yes... she remembered his words and was ready for the sacrifice. In

the midst of her pain, she still seemed to taste that bread of life blessed by his divine hands, and she saw herself cleansed from all worldly concerns. The idea of the kingdom of heaven, where all the afflicted are consoled, soothed her aching heart, considering the slander of which her trial-flogged soul was the victim.

Despite her attitude of calm humility, the senator continued at the peak of his moral anguish:

"I gave you the purest and most sacred of everything I possessed in this world in the hope that you would reciprocate my noblest ideals; but you disregarded all your duties and did not hesitate to fling a handful of mud at us ... Instead of the intimacy of my heart, you preferred the dissolute customs of this age of irresponsibility regarding family values and you slid into the abyss that leads a woman to the depths of crime and immorality.

"Now listen carefully to the words that reveal my heart's most terrible loathing!

"Never again shall you take leave from your domestic endeavors, your daily duties in my home. One more deed to provoke the last reserves of my tolerance and you should not expect any other consequence but death.

"Do not ask my honest hands to commit an act of this nature. If our family traditions have disappeared from the core of your soul, they continue even more alive in mine, as I desire to cultivate them in the sanctuary of my dearest memories. Live in dishonor with your thoughts, but refrain from publicly ridiculing my most sacred sentiments, since patience and freedom also have their limits.

"I shall rise again from this downfall into which your thoughtlessness has cast me!

"From now on, you shall be merely a servant in this house, considering your maternal function that has spared you from death; but you shall not take any part in my daughter's

upbringing. I shall guide her without your assistance and to the end of my days I shall search for my little son, who was lost perhaps because of your criminal thoughtlessness. I shall lavish on my children the immense portion of the love that, in the generosity of my trust, I had reserved for you. However, from now on you shall not seek me out with the intimacy of a wife, which you failed to be due to your unjustifiable disloyalty, but with the respect a slave owes her master!"

During a brief pause in the senator's acrimonious and bitter words, Livia gazed at him in supreme anguish.

She wanted to speak with him as before, yielding her sensitive and loving heart to him; however, knowing his impulsive temperament, she knew it was useless to try to justify herself.

After these thoughts, as she listened embittered with grief to that terrible insinuation about the disappearance of their little son, her soul was overcome by numerous and unjustifiable questions. In light of this slander that made her feel so desolate, she began to wonder if good deeds were in fact seen by the infinitely good Father, who, according to the sublime promises of the Nazarene Messiah, she believed keeps watch from heaven over all sufferers. Hadn't she displayed noble and exemplary conduct as a dedicated mother and loving wife? Wasn't her whole heart set on the hope and faith in that kingdom of sovereign justice that was to be found outside of the material life? Moreover, her hasty visit to Pilate without her husband's permission had been only for the lofty purpose of saving Jesus of Nazareth from a shameful death. Where was the supernatural help that should arrive to explain her distressing situation and reveal such injustice?

Anguished tears blurred her tired, downcast eyes.

But before her husband started with fresh accusations, she saw herself once more in thought before the cross.

A gentle breeze seemed to soothe the wounds that her husband's libel had opened in her heart. A voice that spoke to her in the innermost corners of her awareness reminded her sensitive soul that the Master of Nazareth had also been innocent and had died that day on the cross under the insults of his pitiless executioners. And he was righteous, good and compassionate. From those he had loved most, he had received betrayal and abandonment in the final hour of his testimony, and from those he had helped with his charity and love he had received the poisonous thorns of the cruelest ingratitude. Faced with the vision of his infinite suffering, Livia fortified her faith and implored the Heavenly Father to grant her the fearlessness she needed to overcome the harsh trials of life.

Her grief-stricken thoughts had lasted but for a moment, after which Publius Lentulus continued in a desperate voice:

"I will search for my unfortunate little son for only two more days! After that, I will return to Capernaum to face the passage of time. I will remain in that accursed environment for as long as necessary. As for you, you can withdraw from now on into your indignity, because with the same generous impulse with which I am sparing your life at this moment, I will not hesitate to inflict your final punishment when the time comes!"

And opening the door – which was shaking to the claps of thunder – he exclaimed with terrible intonation:

"Livia, this dolorous moment marks the separation of our destinies forever. Do not dare to cross the line that separates us from each other forever in the same home and in the same life because such a gesture could mean your inescapable sentence to death!"

He slammed the door behind him, muffled by the rumbling of the storm.

Jerusalem was under a true cyclone of destruction which, after it passed, would leave signs of ruin, desolation and death.

Left alone, Livia wept bitterly.

While the atmosphere was washed by the torrential rain that fell heavily in the din of the thunder, her soul too shed bitter and purifying illusions.

Yes ... she was alone and wretched.

From now on she could not count on her husband's support or the gentle love of her little daughter. An angel of peace, however, was watching over her with the sweetness of sentinels that never leave their post of love, redemption and mercy. And causing the balm of hope to trickle into the chalice of her anguished heart, this luminous Spirit made her feel that she was not dispossessed: she had the treasure of faith that united her to Jesus, to the Messiah of selflessness and salvation, who was waiting for her in his kingdom of light and mercy.

X
The Apostle from Samaria

The next day, Publius Lentulus stepped up the search for his little son amongst the pilgrims who were in Jerusalem for the Passover celebrations. He was offering a reward of one grand sestertius[36], or 2,500 asses[37], to whomever handed the missing child over to his servants.

We mustn't forget that the servant Semele, as well as the other female slaves, had been submitted to the most rigorous inquiry at the time of the punishment of the negligent servants on the night watch in the senator's house.

Publius did not allow the women to be punished physically, but in the mysterious case of his son's disappearance, he did submit the female servants to an overtly ruthless interrogation.

Needless to say, Semele had pled her absolute innocence, concealing anything that might betray what she had done.

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[36] Worth 1,000 sestertii. – Emmanuel.
[37] Roman copper coins. – Tr.

However, the three servants who cared most directly for the boy – Semele included – were obliged to join the other slaves as they searched for Marcus in the squares and streets of Jerusalem, although they were given time to rest during the day. Semele took advantage of this circumstance to visit her friends, spending most of her time at the small farm where Andre raised olive trees and lush vineyards a short distance from the road to the main centers.

On this particular day, we find her in lively conversation with the kidnapper and his wife while the child is napping in a corner of the room.

"Is it true that the senator is offering a reward of a thousand sestertii to whomever delivers the boy to him?" asked Andre of Gioras in amazement.

"Yes, it is," said Semele pensively. "And it sure is a sum of Roman money that no one could earn very quickly."

"If it weren't for my just and burning desire for revenge," replied the kidnapper with a malicious smile, "we would just go and collect it for ourselves. But never mind; we don't need the money. We don't need anything from those damned patricians!"

Semele listened to him indifferently, almost completely unaware of what he was saying. Andre, however, did not take his eyes off his accomplice's face, as if trying to discover some secretive thought in her simple and humble manner.

Thus, with the intent of probing her psychological stance, he said in an apparently calm and nonchalant tone, as if probing her most secretive objectives:

"So, Semele, what's the latest news from Benjamin?"

"Well," she replied, referring to her betrothed, "he hasn't yet decided on a definite wedding date due to our many hurdles. As you know, my whole desire, as far as work goes, is to be able to buy that little house in Bethany that you know about. As soon as we do that, we can be together forever."

"Good for you," said Andre, with the certitude of someone who had just found the key to a mystery. "Someday you'll have everything you need for both of you to be happy. As for me, you can rest assured that I'll do everything I can to help you like a father."

"Thank you so much!" rejoiced the girl, gratefully. "Now, I need to get back to work; it must be getting late."

"Don't go yet," said Andre resolutely. "Stay a bit longer. I want to give you a taste of some of our aged wine. We broke it out today to celebrate the good fortune of finding ourselves alive after yesterday's frightful storm!"

Hurrying inside, he went to the wine cellar, where he took a jug of sparkling clear wine and filled an old wine glass with it. Then he went into an adjoining room and opened a small container, letting a few drops of its contents fall into the glass while muttering to himself:

"Ah, Semele! You could have continued on living were it not for this damned reward. It has condemned you to death! ... Benjamin ... such a marriage would mean nothing but bitter poverty. A thousand sestertii is a temptation that even the most well-intentioned and purest soul couldn't resist ... While it was just hardships and other punishments, there was no problem; but now there's money involved, and money usually condemns human creatures to death!"

And mixing the deadly poison in the sparkling wine, he continued mumbling:

"Six hours from now my poor friend will be entering the kingdom of the shades ... What to do? There's nothing left but to wish her a good journey! And in this world no one else will ever know that there is a slave in my house with the noble blood of the aristocrats of the Roman Empire!"

A couple minutes later and the senator's unlucky servant was happily drinking the contents of the glass, thanking Andre's sinister kindness with moving words.

From the door of his stone dwelling, Andre watched the steps of his accomplice on the last bend in the road.

No one would claim the reward offered by Lentulus in his desperation, because that evening at about 7:00, Semele suddenly felt ill and went straight to bed.

Abundant, cold sweat bathed her colorless cheeks, revealing the pallor characteristic of death.

Ana, notwithstanding her sorrow, had already returned to her domestic chores. Hurriedly called to look in on Semele, she found her at the peak of the afflictions that announce the proximity of death to those who are about to depart their material prison.

"Ana ..." said the dying woman, her voice fading, "I'm dying ... but my conscience ... is heavy ... troubled."

"What is it, Semele?" said the other woman, distraught. "Let's trust in God our Heavenly Father, and let's trust in Jesus, who only yesterday watched us from the cross of his suffering with infinite mercy!"

"I feel ... that it's ... too late," murmured the woman in the throes of death. "I ... just ... want ... forgiveness."

But her broken, hoarse voice could not continue. A heavy sob muffled her last words while her face turned purplish as if her heart had stopped instantly, constricted by an irrevocable force.

Ana saw that it was the end and prayed to Jesus to receive her companion's soul into his merciful kingdom and to forgive her for her serious wrongs, which were surely behind the anguished words of her final moments.

The doctor that was called to examine the body, relying on the empiricism of his science, determined that Semele had died from cardiac deficiency. Since the real cause of death was not discovered, Andre of Gioras's secret was enshrouded in the thick darkness of the tomb.

Ana and Livia exchanged their impressions of the event, and despite the profound impact of the dead woman's final words, they viewed her passage to the other life simply as irremediable fatalism.

Following the incident, Publius Lentulus hastened his return to the house in Capernaum, which he had acquired permanently from the former owner in anticipation of a long stay in the area. The return was sad; a laborious trip without hope.

The numerous servants did not notice the profound estrangement that now existed between him and his wife, and it was thus that, although truly separated in heart, in their house they continued the same tradition of respect in front of their subordinates.

After a few days of his second stay in the prosperous and joyful town where Jesus so many times had spoken his sweet, divine words, the senator prepared a report for his friend Flaminius, as well as other members of the Senate, and sent Comenius to Rome as his highly trusted courier.

Hating Palestine, which held so many and such bitter trials for him, but feeling trapped there because of the mysterious disappearance of little Marcus, he requested Flaminius's private intervention in returning his uncle Salvius to his services in the Empire's capital. Actually, he was attempting to rid himself of Fulvia's presence, sensing down deep that this woman had a malevolent influence on his own and his family's destiny. At the same time, filled with a terrible aversion toward Pontius Pilate, he informed his far-off friend of numerous administrative scandals, which, after the Passover incident, he had resolved to correct with the utmost severity. He promised Flaminius Severus that he would examine the needs of the province more closely in order to inform the Roman authorities of the serious wrongdoings of the administration, with the objective that at the appropriate time the governor would be sent to another sector of the Empire. He

also promised to hasten a list of all the injustices of Pilate's acts in his public life, in light of the repeated and continual complaints that had come to his attention from every corner of the province.

In these private letters he also asked his friend to take the steps needed to send a teacher for his daughter; he stopped short, however, of referring to the painful dramas of his private life, with the exception of his son's case, which he cited as the only cause for his indefinite delay in the area.

Comenius left from Joppa with the greatest precaution and obeying strict orders. Reaching Rome some time later, he delivered the letters into the right hands.

In Capernaum, life moved along sadly and silently.

Publius clung to his voluminous archives, procedures, studies and deliberations, preparing the educational program for his daughter or organizing plans for his future activities. He did the utmost to recover from the mental despondency he had fallen into since the distressing events in Jerusalem.

As for Livia, knowing the inflexibility of her husband's proud character and that all the circumstances pointed to her guilt, she had found in the dedicated soul of her servant an extremely loving confidant. She spent almost all of her time immersed in continuous, fervent prayer. The suffering was patent in the deep lines of her pale face. Her eyes, however, revealed the determination and vigor of faith, and brightened her facial expression with a singular radiance despite her obvious despondency.

In Capernaum, the followers of the Master of Nazareth immediately organized a large community of believers in the Messiah, many of them becoming selfless apostles of his doctrine of renunciation, sacrifice and redemption. Some preached, as he had, in public squares, while others healed the sick in his name. Country folk were strangely taken over and manifested a heavenly intelligence and inspiration, teaching the traditions

of Jesus with the greatest clarity. The precursors of the written gospels were compiled from the words of these apostles, and later on, these same words would remain on earth as a message from the Savior of the World for all races, peoples and nations on the planet, as a luminous path to heaven for their souls.

All those who converted to the new belief confessed their life's wrongs in the public plaza as a sign of the humility that was required of them to become part of the Christian community. And so that the meek prophet of Nazareth's redemptive martyrdom on Calvary would never be forgotten, the simple and humble people instituted the worship of the cross, believing it to be the best way to honor the memory of Jesus the Nazarene.

In their deep love for the Messiah, Livia and Ana did not veer from this natural observance of the people's traditions. The cross was the object of their total veneration and absolute respect, even though at that time it represented the instrument of punishment for criminals and villains.

Ana continued to go to the banks of the lake, where some of the Lord's apostles continued to offer his divine teachings to the suffering and unfortunate. It was common to see these former companions of the Messiah crossing country roads like shepherds, enduring the greatest hardships in order to take the consoling words of the Good Tidings to everyone. Impressive kinds of simple and selfless people traveled the longest and roughest roads, dressed in tatters and wearing crude sandals, but preaching the truths of Jesus with perfection and feeling as if their humble faces had been touched by divine grace. For many of them, their world did not extend beyond Judea or Syria, but the truth is that their fearless and serene words would remain in the world throughout the centuries.

More than a month had gone by since Passover of 33 A.D., when, on a beautiful, hot afternoon in Galilee, the senator approached his wife to tell her about his new plans:

"Livia," he began, reserved, "I must inform you that I plan to do some traveling and that I will be away for perhaps two months to fulfill my duties as an emissary of the Emperor regarding special circumstances in this province.

"Since my trip will entail numerous stops, because I intend to stay for a short time in each community along the route to Jerusalem, it will not be possible for me to take you with me, in which case I will leave you as guardian of my daughter.

"As you know, nothing exists between us anymore that would grant you the right to know my innermost concerns; however, I shall repeat my words of that fateful day when our relationship was shattered. Since you remain in this house only for the purpose of your maternal duties, I am trusting Flavia's care to you during my absence until the old teacher I requested from Flaminius arrives from Rome.

"I strongly want you to believe in the confidence I have in your intent to reform yourself as a mother, and that you try to reestablish your integrity, which under such circumstances I would not have questioned before. I also hope that you will refrain from any shameful conduct that would harm my poor daughter forever."

"Publius!" the senator's wife managed to utter sorrowfully, trying to take advantage of that fleeting moment of her husband's calmness so that she could defend herself from the slander that had been uttered against her under the most complicated circumstances. But the senator, shut up in his prideful severity, turned abruptly, not giving her a chance to continue, relegating her even more deeply to her bitter position in their home.

A week later, he left on his venturesome journey.

What animated him the most were the desire to relieve his heart of so many afflictions, the attempt to search for his missing son, and his efforts to catalog the errors and injustices of Pilate's

administration, aimed at divesting him of his public powers in Palestine at the opportune time.

In his resolution, however, he committed a grave error whose dolorous consequences he had not or could not have foreseen due to his own inner turmoil. As a practical man, the circumstance of leaving his wife and child exposed to the perils of a region where they were considered intruders should have been examined more carefully. Furthermore, in his absence he could not count on the dedicated vigilance of Comenius, who was traveling to Rome under the orders of his employer and loyal friend.

All these concerns were present in Livia's mind, endowed as a woman with a finer and more accurate sense of the circumstances to which they were being exposed.

It was therefore with a heavy heart that she watched her husband leave, despite his orders to numerous servants to keep the closest watch over the affairs of the house and his family.

Solemn festivities were prepared in Tiberias by Herod, forewarned by the senator of his personal trip to that city, which represented the first stop of his long excursion. All the most prominent localities were slated as stopping points for the caravan, with Publius receiving in them all the highest honors by administrators, escort contingents and countless servants, who assisted him on his lengthy journey through the least important political units in Palestine.

We must report that Sulpicius Tarquinius was on a mission to Herod's court at the time of Publius Lentulus's festive arrival in the large city in Galilee. He tried not to be noticed by the senator, however, returning on the same day to Jerusalem, where we find him in private conversation with the governor.

"Did you know that Senator Lentulus," said Sulpicius with the pleasure of giving desired and interesting news, "has planned to make a long journey throughout the province?"

"What?" replied Pilate, greatly surprised.

"It's true. I left him in Tiberias, and from there he was heading for Sebaste in a few days. Thanks to a friend, I found out that, according to his itinerary, he won't be returning to Capernaum for forty days."

"What purpose could the senator have for taking such an uncomfortable and unappealing trip? Secret orders from the seat of the Empire?" asked Pilate, fearful of some sort of punishment for his unjust acts in the political administration of the province.

But after a few seconds of thinking it over, as if the private man had defeated the cogitations of the public man, he asked the lictor with great interest:

"And his wife? Did she go with him? Would the senator have the courage to leave her alone, exposed to the unexpected in this country so full of criminals?"

"I knew you would be interested," replied Sulpicius, with feigned dedication and contented malice, "so I got information about the matter from a friend who is accompanying the senator as part of his personal guard. I found out that Livia has remained in Capernaum with her daughter, awaiting the return of her husband."

"Sulpicius," said Pilate pensively, "I imagine that you are aware of my affinity for that lovely creature..."

"I am. As you might recall, I was the one who brought her to your private room not too long ago."

"That's right; you did!"

"Why don't you take advantage of this opportunity for a personal visit to Capernaum?" asked the lictor with ulterior motives, but without touching directly on the delicate matter.

"By Jupiter!" replied Pilate, pleased. "I have an invitation from Cusa and other high-ranking functionaries of Antipas in that city, so I might just consider it. But what are you suggesting, exactly?"

"Well, sir," said Sulpicius Tarquinius with hypocritical modesty, "above all, my idea is meant for your personal happiness, and besides, I myself am strongly attracted to a young servant in the house. Her name is Ana. Her remarkable and simple beauty is the most seductive I've ever seen in the women of Samaria."

"Really? I've never seen you in love. I thought you had already gotten over the rash days of youth. Well, at any rate, this means that I'm not alone in the happiness that the idea of the senator's unexpected trip has brought to me," replied Pilate, obviously in good spirits.

And as if all the details of his plan had been set in that same instant, he said to the lictor, who listened amid gratification and pride:

"Sulpicius, you'll stay here in Jerusalem just long enough for a short rest. Then you'll tell Cusa that I plan to visit the city. Once you've done that, you'll go to Senator Lentulus's residence, where you'll discretely advise his wife of my decision, notifying her of the anticipated day of my departure and arrival there. I hope that, because of her husband's inconsideration for having left her alone in such a place, she'll come in person to Capernaum to meet me in order to get away from the rude and ignorant Galileans, and that through my conversation and friendship, she'll remember for a few hours her happy days at the Court."

"Very well," responded the lictor, bursting with delight, "I'll follow your orders to the letter."

Sulpicius Tarquinius left with his lower sentiments satisfied, anticipating the moment he would get to see once more the young Samaritan that had aroused the covetousness of his material senses, a covetousness that had not had time to manifest when he was in the personal service of Publius Lentulus.

Following instructions, Sulpicius arrived four days later in Capernaum, where the announcement of the governor's visit was received with pleasure by the political authorities.

The same was not the case at Publius's residence, however, where he got a cool reception from the employees and slaves of the house. At his call, Maximus, Comenius's replacement for the customary household services, appeared, albeit far from possessing Comenius's strength and experience.

Received solicitously by the old servant – who happened to be a personal acquaintance – the lictor requested Ana's presence under the pretense of a private meeting to resolve a certain matter.

Lentulus's old servant did not hesitate, and the lictor immediately enveloped her in his ardent, licentious gaze.

The maid was both intrigued and respectful, and asked him the reason for his unexpected visit. Tarquinius explained that he needed to meet with Livia in private; then he made his unspeakable intensions clear to the poor girl through the most shameful and insolent propositions.

After the extremely pale Ana had finished listening to his muffled, insulting intentions with the greatest caution and patience in order to avoid a scandal, the honorable servant replied in an austere and valiant voice:

"Mr. Lictor, I will call my mistress to attend to you in a few moments, but as for me, I must inform you that you are mistaken. I am not the kind of person you think I am."

And walking resolutely inside, she alerted her mistress of Sulpicius's persistent intention of speaking with her personally. Livia was surprised not only by the unexpected visit but also by the look on her servant's face, which was extremely pallid after the shock she had just received. Ana tried not to let her know immediately what had happened, and said:

"Ma'am, lictor Sulpicius seems to be in a rush. You should hurry."

Without allowing herself to get caught up in the circumstances, Livia attended to the messenger with her usual attention.

The lictor bowed to her with deep reverence, addressing her respectfully to fulfill the duties that had brought him:

"Madam, I have come on behalf of His Excellency the Procurator of Judea, who has the honor of informing you of his arrival in Capernaum the first of next week."

Livia's eyes blazed with justified indignation, while numerous thoughts assaulted her mind. Gathering her energies, she had the courage to deliver a response in keeping with the circumstances:

"Mr. Lictor, I thank you for your kind words; however, I must inform you of the fact that my husband is traveling at this time, and we are receiving no one at our home in his absence."

And with a light gesture, she made it clear that he should take his leave, which Sulpicius angrily understood. He bid her farewell with a respectful bow.

Surprised by her attitude, since to the lictor's mind Livia's cheating was an uncontestable fact, he withdrew, greatly disappointed but not without scheming in his depraved maliciousness.

Running into one of the resident's guardian soldiers – a colleague and personal friend – he remarked with feigned interest:

"Octavius, I might return this week sometime and I'd like to see the rare jewel of my happiness and hopes once again."

"And what jewel might that be?" asked a curious Octavius.

"Ana."

"All right. That should be easy enough."

"But listen," said the lictor, already suspecting that his prey would do anything to escape from his hands, "Ana is used

to being away a lot, and if that happens this time, I hope that, as a friend, you won't let me down and that you'll give me the information I need when the time comes."

"You can count on it."

Having heard the most important details of this dialog, let us go back inside the house, where, with an oppressed soul, Livia is confiding the painful thoughts weighing on her heart to her devoted servant. After revealing her justified fears, which were fully acknowledged by Ana, who in turn informed Livia of Sulpicius's insolence, the poor woman unraveled the unending series of her sorrows to her simple and kindhearted confidant, telling her about all the suffering that had torn her loving and sensitive soul from the first day that slander had found its way into her husband's proud heart. As she listened to this extraordinary story, the servant's tears reflected her deep understanding of the anguish of this woman, who, considering her education and noble origins, was quite out of place in that primitive region.

As the noble Livia finished the pain-filled story of her misfortunes, she pointed out with undisguised bitterness:

"Truth is, I have done everything I could to avoid an unjustifiable and incomprehensible scandal. Now, however, I feel that the situation is about to get much worse because of my tormentors' persistence and my husband's neglect in light of these events. I find myself in quite a quandary.

"If I send for him by messenger and let him know what is happening so that he can protect us, perhaps he won't understand the course of events and will interpret my fears as a sign of prior guilt, or, as a consequence of his stern reproach and serious threats, he might see my scruples as a desire to right the wrongs I didn't actually commit. On the other hand, if I don't tell him about these dreadful incidents, then, when the governor comes

to Capernaum, it will create yet another scandal because it will look like I had taken advantage of his absence.

"I take Jesus alone as my judge in this awful situation, in which the only witnesses must be my heart and my conscience!

"What concerns me the most right now, my good Ana, is not only the obligation of watching out for myself, because I've already experienced the utmost bitter disillusionment and merciless slander. No, it's for my poor daughter instead, because I get the feeling that here in Palestine villains are in places where men of pure and incorruptible sentiments should be.

"As you know, my poor little son is already gone, snatched away in this mayhem of dangers, and perhaps murdered by indifferent and criminal hands ... My motherly soul tells me that my poor Marcus is still alive, but where and how? We've searched every corner in vain, but haven't uncovered the slightest sign of his presence or passage ... Now, my conscience is telling me to safeguard my little daughter from evil snares!"

"Ma'am," said her servant with a singular flash in her eyes, as if she had found a sudden and proper solution to the problem, "what you are saying shows the greatest common sense and wisdom ... I too share your fears and I think we should do everything we can to save the girl and yourself from the claws of these murderous wolves ... Why don't we take refuge in some completely safe place until those dreadful men leave these parts?! But I think it would be useless to look for shelter in Capernaum under these circumstances. We should go somewhere else."

"Where?" asked Livia anxiously.

"I have a plan," said Ana hopefully. "If you would agree to it, we could leave with the little girl and take refuge in Samaria of Judea in the house of Simeon, whose respectable age would protect us from any danger."

"But Samaria," replied Livia, somewhat dismayed, "is so far away."

"Truth is, my lady, we need such a place. I agree that it is a long ways, but we could leave right away. We could rent fresh animals after resting a bit in Nain. It would take us one or two days to reach the valley of Shechem, where my uncle's old property is located. Maximus would be notified of your decision, with no other pretext than the fact that this is what you need to do at this time. In the event that the senator returns unexpectedly, he will be immediately informed of the situation, and can find out about your honesty himself."

"I think this idea is our best recourse," said Livia, more or less comforted. "Furthermore, I trust that the Master will not abandon us during such harsh trials.

"We'll make our travel preparations today, and you'll go to the city to arrange not only for the animals that will take us to Nain but also for one of your relatives to accompany us; that way we will be traveling in the greatest simplicity, without attracting any attention, but we'll also be taking precautions against any possible adversities.

"Don't worry about expenses; I have all the money we need."

And so it was settled.

On the day before their departure, Livia called the servant who was acting as the house steward at the time:

"Maximus, tomorrow compelling reasons will be taking me to Samaria of Judea, where I will remain for a few days with my daughter. I'll be taking Ana and I expect you to be as dedicated to your masters as always."

The servant bowed, surprised by his mistress's announcement. After all, she was little used to being outside her home. Knowing that he did not have the right to question her decisions, he respectfully suggested:

"Ma'am, I hope you have decided which servants will be going with you."

"No, Maximus. I do not want the usual formalities in trips of this nature. I'll be going with friends from Capernaum, and I plan to travel very simply. I'm telling you of my plans only because you will need to redouble the vigilance in my absence, and because your master might return unexpectedly. If he does, you will advise him of my decision based only on what I have told you."

As the servant bowed respectfully, Livia returned to her rooms to solve all the problems related to her peace of mind. Just before dawn the next day, a simple caravan set out from Capernaum. In it were Livia, her little daughter, Ana and one of her old and respectable relatives. They went along the road that bordered the big lake almost in a whimsical semicircle, following the Jordan River as it descended, rippling here and calm there, in the direction of the Dead Sea.

They stopped briefly in Nain to change animals, and then followed the same route toward the valley of Shechem where, in the late afternoon, they dismounted in front of Simeon's stone house. He welcomed his guests, weeping with joy.

In spite of his advanced age, the old Samaritan seemed to be touched by divine grace, so noteworthy was the movement he had promulgated all over the region by spreading the consoling teachings of the prophet of Nazareth.

Amid the shady, leafy olive trees he had erected a large, heavy and rugged cross, with a large rustic table nearby at which believers would sit on simple makeshift benches to listen to his comforting words.

Five happy days passed, the two women feeling much at ease in that simple environment.

In the afternoon, under the free and wholesome caresses of nature in the green heart of the harmonious landscape, the

humble assembly of Samaritans gathered, ready to accept the thoughts of love and sublime mercy of the Nazarene Messiah.

Simeon, who lived there without his wife, whom God had already taken, and without his children, who were raising their own families in distant villages, had become the group's leader. Like a venerable patriarch in his serene old age, he recounted the events of Jesus' life as if divine inspiration were smiling on him at such moments, such was the profound philosophical beauty of his comments and his prayers as they rose spontaneously from the loving sincerity of his heart.

As if they were still drinking in the words of the Master near Mt. Gerizim, almost everyone present in that simple poetry of nature wept with spiritual emotion and wonder, touched by his profound and loving words, and magnetized by the beauty of his sermons replete with uncommon teachings, charity and meekness.

At the time, Christians did not have any written gospels, which were written by Apostles somewhat later. That is why all the preachers of the Good News collected the Master's proverbs and lessons by writing them down themselves or with the help of scribes, thereby gathering Jesus' teachings for study in the public meetings in the synagogues.

Although he had no synagogue, Simeon followed the same method.

With his characteristic patience, he wrote down everything he knew about the Master of Nazareth in order to recall him during his humble and unpretentious gatherings. He also recorded any new lessons from the memories of Jesus' companions, or from those nameless apostles of early Christianity as they passed through his ancient village, crossing Palestine in every direction.

His guests had been recovering in that endearing environment for six days, when, during one of his usual sermons

on the Messiah that afternoon, the venerable old man seemed touched by the most exalted spiritual influences.

The final hues of twilight were spilling over the landscape in muted tones of emerald and topaz under an indescribable blue sky.

The mixed assembly contained suffering people of every sort, reminding Livia of that memorable afternoon in Capernaum when she had heard the Lord for the first time. Men in tatters and women in rags crowded around with squalid children, looking expectantly at the old man, who, deeply moved, explained in his simple and sincere words:

"Brethren, you should have seen the Lord's sweet resignation in his final moments!

"With his eyes gazing at the sky, as if he were already enjoying the contemplation of the heavenly blessings in the kingdom of our Father, I watched as the Master kindly forgave all who had wronged him! Only one of his most beloved disciples remained at the foot of the cross to support his mother in her dreadful ordeal! ... Very few of his usual followers were present at that grief-stricken hour, obviously because those of us who loved him so much could not express our sentiments before that infuriated mob without grave danger to our personal safety. But how much all of us would love to go through the same suffering!

"From time to time, one or another of the most insolent of his executioners would approach the Lord's scourged body in his martyrdom and lacerate his chest with his merciless spear!"

The kindly old man wiped the sweat from his face and continued with moist eyes:

"At one point I noticed that Jesus took his calm and lucid eyes off the sky and contemplated the crowd, rebellious with criminal fury! ... Some drunken soldiers scourged him once more, but not a single moan escaped from his afflicted breast in the agony of death! ... He then cast his gentle and merciful eyes from

the mount of sacrifice to the rows of houses in the accursed city! As I saw him looking expectantly with the loving tenderness of a father at the many who were taunting him in the final tortures of death, I wept with shame for our cruelties and weaknesses.

"The crowd was getting into numerous fights ... Deafening shouts and revolting swearing surrounded him on the cross, and we could see the copious sweat of his final moments! ... But as if reading the profound secrets of human destinies in the book of the future, the Messiah gazed again On High and said with infinite goodness: 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do!'"

Old Simeon's voice choked with tears as he recalled those memories, his audience deeply moved by his narrative.

Other brothers from the community spoke in turn, allowing the old man to rest from his efforts.

One of them, however, contrary to the topics addressed that day, exclaimed to everyone's surprise:

"Brethren, before we leave, let us remember that the Messiah was continually reminding his disciples of the need for vigilance and prayer, because in this world the wolves are always prowling around the flocks of sheep!"

Simeon heard the warning and went into deep meditation, his eyes fixed on the large cross standing a few yards away from his humble seat.

After a few minutes of spontaneous concentration, his eyes overflowed with tears while focused on the rustic cross as if some vision were hovering over it, unbeknown to those who were watching him.

Afterwards, closing the afternoon meeting, he spoke, deeply moved:

"My children, it is not without just purpose that our brother referred to vigilance and prayer! Something that I

cannot define tells me in my heart that the time for us to bear witness is nigh ... I can see with my spirit sight that our cross is illuminated today, perhaps announcing the glorious moment of our deaths ... My poor eyes fill with tears, because amid the light of the cross, I can hear a soft voice saying in a soft and gentle tone: 'Simeon, teach your flock the lesson of renunciation and humility through the example of your dedication and your own sacrifice! Watch and pray, for the blessed moment of your entry into the Kingdom is nigh; even so, protect the sheep of your fold from the dark attacks of voracious, cruel wolves as they run freely over the earth along every pathway. Know this, however: if all are to receive according to their deeds, then the evil ones will have their day of learning and punishment according to their wrongs!'"

The old Samaritan's face was bathed in tears, but a sweet serenity radiated in his loving and compassionate eyes, revealing his unbreakable and courageous strength.

Lifting his long, thin hands to the heavens, where the first stars were already shining, he turned to Jesus in ardent prayer:

"Lord, forgive us our weaknesses and hesitations in the struggles of human life, where our sentiments are so precarious and pitiful! ... Bless our daily efforts and forgive our wrongs if any of us meeting here today come into your presence with a mind filled with thoughts that are not of the good and the love that you taught us! ... And if the hour of our sacrifice has come, help us with your infinite mercy so that our faith will not waver in the pain-filled moment of our testimony!"

The moving prayer signaled the end of the meeting, and those present returned deeply troubled to their humble, poor huts.

The old man rested very little that night, deeply concerned with Livia and his niece, who had told him of the serious events that had led them to request his protection. It seemed to him that

loving appeals from the invisible world were filling his soul with an indefinable apprehension and strange feelings that he could not eliminate from his mind for his needed moments of repose.

While these events were taking place in the valley of Shechem, however, let us return to Capernaum, where on that very afternoon the governor had arrived with great pomp.

Amid the tumult of the numerous festivities organized by the agents of Herod Antipas, the illustrious traveler's first thoughts cannot escape us.

Having spoken at length with his friend Octavius on the grounds of the senator's residence, and having been updated on the current events, Sulpicius informed Pilate that both of their coveted prey had fled like migrating birds to the woods of Samaria.

The governor was surprised at the woman's resistance, accustomed as he was to easy conquests. Admiring her noble heroism, he concluded that, after all, such obstinacy in his pursuit was unjustifiable; there was no lack of other tempting and beautiful women, who, due to his high social standing in Palestine, wanted to win his favor.

As he was entertaining these thoughts, the perverse lictor, anticipating with pleasure the difficult conquest of his victim, whispered in his ear:

"Mr. Governor, if you will agree, I will go to Samaria of Judea to check things out. It must be a little more than thirty miles from here to the valley of Shechem, which is just a jump for our horses. I could take six soldiers with me, which should be sufficient for maintaining order anywhere around these parts."

"Sulpicius, as far as I'm concerned, I don't see any further need for such measures," said Pilate, resigned.

"Well," explained the self-serving lictor, "maybe not for you, but there is for me. I feel enslaved to a woman whom I must possess at any cost.

"Now it is my turn to humbly ask you to grant me this permission," he emphasized, desperate and at the peak of his impure thoughts.

"All right," mumbled Pilate indifferently, like someone doing a favor for a trusted servant, "you have my permission. I think that a Roman's love must surpass any sentiment of the slaves of this country.

"You may leave and take your friends with you, but don't forget that we must return to Nazareth in three days. Won't two days be enough for what you're planning?"

"But," continued the lictor maliciously, "what if there's resistance?"

"That's why you're taking your men along, and I authorize you to take the necessary measures for your plans. Whatever you do, don't forget to offer the patricians the favors of our consideration, but to those who are not, apply the justice of our dominance and our merciless power."

That very night, Sulpicius Tarquinius chose his most trusted men and by dawn seven bold horsemen were on their way, switching fiery steeds at the most important stops as they headed towards Samaria.

The lictor started out on his adventure like someone heading for the unknown, with the firm intention, however, of attaining his ends regardless of the means. Condemnable thoughts whirled around in his mind, drowning his restless and insane heart in a wave of indefinable, criminal desires.

Returning our attention to the humble house in the valley, we find Simeon busily occupied on that unforgettable day of his life.

After a frugal lunch, he organized all his notes and parchments, and after more than an hour of fervent meditation and prayer, he called his guests and spoke to them gravely, as the sun began to set over the horizon:

"My daughters, the vision before my poor eyes during our prayers yesterday was a serious warning to my heart. Also, all day today and this evening I have been hearing soft appeals calling me, and even though I do not really know what they mean, I am filled with gentle peace, believing my departure for the Kingdom is very near ... Something deep down, however, tells me that the hour has not yet struck for the two of you, and recalling our good and merciful Master's teaching about the wolves and the sheep, I feel I must protect you from any danger. That is why I must ask you to follow me inside the house."

The venerable old man stood up, and walking to his hovel, he removed some blocks from an opening in the stone wall, indicating in his serene simplicity:

"Let's go in."

"But uncle," Ana replied a bit surprised, "is this really necessary?"

"Dear child, never question the advice of those who have grown old in their struggles and suffering. This is a decisive day and Jesus would not deceive my heart."

"Oh, no! Is the Master going to deprive us of your loving and consoling presence?" asked the poor girl bathed in tears, as Livia, very moved, followed them leading her beloved daughter by the hand.

"Yes," replied Simeon, with calm courage, gazing up at the blue sky, "for us there can be only one will, the will of God. The Lord's designs are fulfilled in his servants."

The four entered a narrow passageway, which in a few yards would lead to a modest refuge carved into the stone. The old man said in a solemn tone:

"It's been more than twenty years since I opened this underground refuge to anyone ... Sacred memories of my wife made me close it for good as a tomb holding my dearest illusions;

but this morning I decidedly reopened it, cleared it, and stocked it with everything needed for one day, having in mind your safety until nightfall. This shelter is hidden in the rocks, which, along with the olive trees, beautify our prayer retreat. And though it might seem stuffy, the place receives the pure air from the valley just like our own house.

"You will be safe here. Something is telling me that decisive times are approaching. I put enough food in here for the three of you, and if I'm not back by dusk, you know how to move the stone door to my bedroom. From here you can hear any noises outside so that you will be aware of any danger."

"No one else knows about this place?" asked Ana anxiously.

"No one, except God and my absent children."

Deeply moved, Livia uttered her sincerest gratitude:

"Simeon," she said, "I know only too well the enemy's power, and your fears are well justified. I will never forget your fatherly gesture to save me from my merciless and ruthless tormentor.

"Don't thank me, Ma'am, for I am unworthy. Let us thank Jesus for his precious purpose during the bitter time of our trials."

Pulling a small, crude wooden cross from the folds of his humble tunic, he gave it to the senator's wife, saying in a serene voice:

"Only God knows the time that is nigh, and this hour may mark the final moments of our time together here on earth. If that is the case, keep this cross as a memento from a humble servant ... It expresses my sincere gratitude."

Since Livia and Ana had begun to weep at his moving words, the old man continued quietly:

"Don't cry if my time has come! If Jesus calls some of us to his service before others, let us remember that we shall all meet again some day in the loving light of his kingdom of love and mercy, where all the afflicted will be consoled."

And as if his spirit were in full contemplation of other spheres, whose light filled him with prophetic intuition, he turned to Livia, profoundly moved:

"Let us trust in Divine Providence! If I am to bear witness soon, I am entrusting my poor Ana to you as I would my fondest memory! ... After I embraced the teachings of the Messiah, all my own children forsook me because they were unable to grasp the holiest purposes of my heart ... But Ana, despite her youth, understood as I did the sweet Crucified One in Jerusalem!

"As for you, Ana," he said, placing his right hand on his niece's head, "love your mistress as if you were the humblest of all her slaves!"

Just then, they heard loud noises, as if an undecipherable clamor were coming from the rocks, giving the impression of stamping horses approaching.

The old man made a farewell gesture as Livia and Ana kneeled before his respectable and loving figure. In tears, both of them took his wrinkled hands and covered them with tender kisses.

Simeon quickly went down the short passageway and repositioned the stones with great care.

A few minutes later, he was opening the door of his humble and generous home to Sulpicius Tarquinius and his companions, understanding at last that Jesus' warnings in the silence of his fervent prayers had not failed him.

The lictor addressed him unceremoniously, doing his best to block out the impression the old man's majestic appearance was having on him with his courageous, serene look and long white beard.

"Old man," he said rudely, "through some acquaintances of yours I know that your name is Simeon, and I also know that you are lodging a noble woman from Capernaum here

together with her servant. I have come on the part of the highest authorities to speak personally with these women in private."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, lictor," Simeon replied humbly. "It is true that Senator Lentulus's wife did stop here for a bit, but it was only because she was accompanied by one of my grandnieces that she did me the honor of resting here for a few hours."

"But you must know where they are now."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"You mean you don't know?"

"I have always understood," the old man replied courageously, "that I should not know anything that might be used to harm my fellow beings."

"That is another matter," retorted Sulpicius, enraged like a liar whose most secret thoughts have been found out. "So you mean to hide these women's whereabouts from me based on the whims of your old age senility?"

"It's not that. Knowing that we are all brothers, I feel it is my duty to support the weaker against the wickedness of the stronger."

"I'm not looking to do them any harm, and let me remind you that these insulting insinuations deserve the punishment of justice."

"Lictor," replied Simeon very serenely, "maybe you can fool people, but you cannot fool God with your unspeakable, impure sentiments. I know why you have come to these parts and I lament your criminal impulsiveness ... Your conscience is heavy with dishonest, impure thoughts, but every moment is an opportunity for the redemption that God grants us in his infinite goodness ... Turn from the perfidy that brought you here and choose another path, because just as people can be saved by the good they practice, they can also die by the devastating fire of the passions that drag them into the most heinous crimes."

"You bastard!" shouted Sulpicius, flushed with rage, while the amazed soldiers observed the calm courage of the brave old man from Samaria. "No wonder your neighbors told me that you are the biggest sorcerer around!

"Damn you, how dare you insult the agents of the Empire like this; I can pulverize you with a simple word! With what right do you mock my power?"

"With the right of God's truths: they command us to love our neighbor as ourselves ... You may be agents of an Empire that has no other law than ruthless violence in the execution of any crime, but I answer to a more sovereign power than yours, one that is full of mercy and goodness! That power and that Empire come from God, whose merciful justice is above that of all people and nations!"

Perceiving that his courage and moral fortitude were unbreakable, the lictor, although burning with hate, replied deceptively:

"Fine, but I didn't come here to learn about your witchcraft and your religious fanaticism. One last time: are you or are you not going to tell me exactly what I want to know about your guests?"

"I cannot," replied Simeon courageously, "that is my final word."

"Arrest him!" said Sulpicius, turning to his aides, red with rage at having been defeated in that battle of words.

The old Christian of Samaria yielded without the least bit of resistance as he began to suffer his first humiliations at the hands of the soldiers.

At the first blows of the sword, Sulpicius stated sarcastically:

"So where are the powers of your God now? Why doesn't he defend you? Is God's empire so weak? Why don't the powers of heaven rescue you and slay us on your behalf?"

These words were followed by the soldiers' laughter as they relished the criminal impulses of their commander.

Simeon, however, was well-prepared for bearing witness to his ardent and sincere faith. Even with his hands tied, he was still able to reply with his usual serenity:

"Lictor, even if I were a powerful man like your Caesar, I would never order anyone's death. I am one of those who would refuse even the right of so-called self-defense, because it is written in the Law, 'You shall not kill.' There's nothing in there authorizing people to kill their brothers under this or that circumstance ... Our whole defense in this world lies in God, for God is the Creator of all life and God alone establishes and determines our destinies."

Sulpicius had reached the peak of his hatred before that indomitable and enlightened courage. Turning to one of his soldiers, he ordered furiously:

"Mercius, you're in charge of this idiotic old sorcerer. Don't take your eyes off of him. If he tries to escape, use your sword on him!"

Aware that his end was near, the venerable old man gazed at his aggressor with heroic humility.

Sulpicius and his companions invaded his house and yard, driving out an old woman servant with foul language and stones. In his bedroom they found the gospels and yellowing parchments, as well as some small mementos that he kept in memory of his dearest affections.

All the objects of his most sacred remembrances were brought before him and ruthlessly broken. Before his serene and kind eyes, they tore up his tunics and old papyruses amid repulsive sarcasm and mockery.

When the search was over, the lictor paced around the environs for more than two hours with his hands behind his

back, trying to figure out the best way to extract the confession as to the whereabouts of his victims. He finally returned to the same room, where he questioned him again.

"Simeon," he said again, with self-interest, "tell me what I want to know and I will let you go."

"For that price, all the freedom in the world would be painful to me. Death is preferable to compromising with evil," replied the old man with the same courage.

Sulpicius Tarquinius ground his teeth in fury, screaming as if he were possessed:

"You old bastard! I shall figure out a way to make you confess!"

With that, he spied the enormous cross standing a few yards from the door, and as if he had guessed the best instrument of torture to extract what he wanted to know, he turned to his soldiers with a somber voice:

"Bind him to the cross like the Master of his sorcery."

Remembering the grand moments of Calvary, the old man let himself be carried off without resisting, inwardly thanking Jesus for his providential warning in time to save from the hands of their enemy the two women he regarded as his much-loved daughters.

The soldiers immediately tied their victim to the heavy cross without him offering the slightest bit of resistance.

Twilight was approaching, and Simeon remembered that the Lord had suffered more intensely on his day at Calvary. In ardent prayer, he asked the Heavenly Father for courage and resignation for the anguishing ordeal. He remembered his absent children and beseeched Jesus to gather them into the mantle of his infinite mercy. It was during this interim when, tied to the cross by his arms, trunk and legs, he saw that some of his regular prayer companions were arriving for the evening meeting. They were immediately detained by the soldiers and their implacable commander.

When asked about the old man with his back partially bared for the cruelty of the whip, all of them, without a single exception, claimed not to know him.

As if a poisoned thorn had pierced his heart, their ingratitude wounded his kind and sincere soul more than the attacks of the merciless Romans.

Nevertheless, he immediately gathered his spiritual energies, and gazing On High he murmured softly in anxious and ardent prayer:

"Lord, you too were forsaken! ... You were the Lamb of God, innocent and pure. You suffered the bitterest pain and experienced the most grievous betrayals! ... May it not be your wretched and sinful servant who denies the purifying martyrdom of testimony!"

By this time, the enclosure was filling with people who, in accord with Sulpicius's instructions, were sitting on the crude benches in a semicircle so that they could watch the brutal scene as a painful lesson for those who disobey the justice of the Empire.

At his commander's orders, the first soldier began the whipping; the old man did not let out the slightest moan. However, just as the soldier was about to apply the leather strips of execrable torture for the third time, he suddenly stopped, saying to Tarquinius in a low voice and discreet tone:

"Mr. Lictor, there's a light at the top of the cross that is keeping me from continuing."

Angrily, Sulpicius ordered another to replace him, but the same thing happened with all the tormentors he ordered to carry out the sinister job.

Desperate with inconceivable hatred, Sulpicius took the whip himself and applied it to the victim's body, which contorted in anguishing suffering.

Bathed in sweat and blood, Simeon felt his aging bones cracking as they broke to pieces each time the whip lashed his weakened flesh. His lips were murmuring fervent prayers, appeals to Jesus for the torment not to be too long. In spite of the fear that had caused them to desert the old disciple of Jesus, all those present wept as they watched his unspeakable suffering.

Finally, Simeon's head hung down and he nearly passed out, foretelling the end of his body's endurance of the torture.

Sulpicius Tarquinius stopped his heinous beating for a moment, and approaching the old man, spoke expectantly in his ear:

"Will you confess now?

But the exhausted old Samaritan, seasoned in earthly struggles from more than seventy years of suffering, said in a fading voice:

"The ... Christian ... must ... die ... with Jesus ... for ... the good ... and ... for ... the truth ..."

"Then die, you wretch!" Sulpicius shouted in a booming voice. Taking his sword, he thrust the blade into the sagging chest. The blood gushed out, red and abundant.

Exhausted from the torture, the old man watched without fear the final act that was about to put an end to his suffering. He felt the sensation of an unknown instrument opening his aching chest, suffocated by mortal anguish.

Suddenly, however, he saw two snow-white translucent hands that seemed to be tenderly caressing his whitened hair.

As he blinked his eyes at that dolorous moment, he noticed that the scenery had changed.

The sky was different and he no longer saw his deserters and executioners. The surroundings were saturated with a gentle and comforting light, while the soft echoes of a heavenly song came to his ears, sung, perhaps, by an invisible choir. He heard scattered hymns, exalting the pain of all the unfortunate, all

the afflicted in the world, and beheld in wonder the welcoming smile of beautiful beings.

He thought he recognized the landscape. He felt transported to the delightful spots of Capernaum in the sweet moments when he prepared to receive the blessing of the Messiah. He could have sworn that he had landed by some mysterious process in a Galilee of more splendid flowers and a more beautiful sky. There were birds of light, like winged lilies from paradise, singing in the lush trees, which must have been from celestial Eden.

He tried to master his emotions in the brightness of that Promised Land, which to his eyes had to be the enchanted land of the "Kingdom of the Lord."

For a moment he remembered the earthly sphere of his final worries and pains. A sensation of weariness overcame his worn out soul, but a voice that his ears easily recognized among thousands of other voices spoke softly to his heart:

"Simeon, the time for repose has come! ... Rest now from your grief and pain, for you have come to my Kingdom, where you will enjoy the infinite mercy of our Father forever!"

Finally, it seemed like someone was pulling him close with the greatest of care and love.

A soothing balm comforted his exhausted and embittered soul. The old servant of Jesus closed his eyes placidly, caressed by an angelic being that placed its translucent hands lightly over his failed heart.

Returning, however, to the dreadful spectacle at the house of the old man from Samaria, we find a crowd of people watching the appalling scene, paralyzed with terror.

Bound to the cross, old Simeon's body spurted blood from the gaping wound in his heart. His head hung down forever, as if laying claim to the benevolent repose of the earth. His venerable

beard was tinted red from the splatters of blood from the ongoing lashes, for Sulpicius continued to whip the body fastened to the shameful cross of martyrdom, even though he knew that the thrust of the sword had been the final detail of the monstrous drama.

One could say that the unleashed forces of darkness had completely taken over the soul of the lictor, who, seized with convulsive, unspeakable fury, whipped the body without pity in a torrent of insults to impress the crowd that was watching, terrified in astonishment.

"See," he screamed furiously, "see how old Samaritans and murderous sorcerers must die! ... You old bastard! ... Take one more memory with you to hell!"

And the whip fell ruthlessly on the victim's shattered remains, now reduced to a bloody pulp.

Whether due to the fact that the cross had not been set very deep and was now shaking with Sulpicius's repeated and violent movements, or due to punishment by the powerful forces of the invisible world, the huge cross suddenly toppled over.

In vain the lictor tried to save himself from a terrible death as he glimpsed the situation for a split second. The top of the cross struck his head a single blow, rendering his attempt at escape useless. Thrown to the ground all of a sudden, Sulpicius Tarquinius did not even have time to utter a groan. His brains, mixed with blood, trickled from the base of his shattered skull.

In an instant, everyone ran to the prostrate body of the wolf, mutilated after the sacrifice of the lamb. One of the soldiers examined his chest, where his heart was still beating automatically.

The executioner's mouth was open, but no longer from his blasphemous ranting. Saliva and blood foamed from his reddened throat like the repugnant and shameful slobber of a monster. His eyes were wide open as if, in the spasms of terror, they were staring eternally at an endless phalanx of tenebrous ghosts.

Deeply affected by the unexpected accident, which they tied to the influence of the mysterious light they had seen hovering over the cross, the soldiers did not know what to do. They too were confused in the wave of general fear and surprise of those first moments.

Pale with bitter bewilderment, the noble figure of Livia appeared at the door.

Inside the cave where they had taken refuge, she and Ana had sensed the danger and both of them had prayed fervently, imploring the compassion of Jesus at that grievous time.

The unclear sounds of the arguments and the uproar of the people reached their ears in noisy altercations at the moment of the incident, believed by those who had been watching to be a punishment from heaven.

Both women, afflicted and troubled, had decided to come out because it was late, regardless of the consequences.

When they arrived at the door and saw the horrendous spectacle of Simeon's body nearly reduced to a shapeless pulp at the base of the cross, and when they saw Sulpicius's body stretched out a few steps away with the base of his skull crushed, they naturally experienced an indefinable horror.

This turmoil of emotions lasted only a few minutes, however.

While her servant broke down in sobs, Livia, with the fortitude that characterized her soul and the faith that purified her heart, understood at a glance what had happened. Realizing that the situation demanded the strength of a powerful will to restore the general calm, she resolutely handed her daughter over to her servant and said:

"Ana, I am asking for your strongest courage in this grievous ordeal, because it is our duty to remember that Jesus' goodness has prepared us to endure with dignity yet another difficult and painful trial! Keep Flavia with you while I see to it that peace is restored!"

She walked quickly toward the mob, which quieted down as she approached.

That woman of noble and graceful beauty displayed a flame of deep indignation and bitterness in her eyes. Her stern look revealed the presence of an avenging angel that had appeared among those ignorant and humble people at just the right time.

Approaching the cross where the two bodies lay surrounded by confusion, she asked Jesus for the courage and strength she needed to control the anxiety and trouble of everyone around her. She felt that a super-human force had taken charge of her soul at exactly the right moment. For a minute she thought of her husband, social conventions, and the controversial scandal that had given rise to those events, but the sacrifice and noble death of Simeon were a more comforting and holier example for her. She forgot everything else and remembered that Jesus hovered above all the transitory things of earth as the highest symbol of truth and love for the undying happiness of all life.

Overcome with veneration as he realized who was standing near him, one of the soldiers approached Livia, saying with the utmost respect:

"Madam, I must tell you our names so that you may make use of us however you deem necessary."

"Soldiers," she said resolutely, "you need not mention your names. I thank you for your willing dedication, which only a few minutes ago could have been deemed a criminal lack of conscience. I am only sorry that six men allied with this crowd allowed the consummation of this act of infamy and supreme cowardice, which divine justice has just punished right in front of you!"

As if under a spell, everyone became silent when they heard these forceful words.

The common folk have these mysterious inconsistencies. Sometimes, all that is needed is a gesture and they will cast themselves

headlong into the abyss of crime and disorder, and then, with a sharp reprimand, they will return to silence and normalcy.

Livia realized that the situation was in her hands, and addressing Sulpicius's agents, she spoke courageously:

"Come, let us take measures to restore calm by removing these bodies."

"Madam," suggested one of them respectfully, "we should probably send a message to Capernaum to advise the governor of what has happened."

She responded firmly, however, with the same calm expression:

"Soldier, none of you will leave until you bury these bodies. If your governor has the heart of a beast, I now feel obliged to protect the peace of well-formed souls. I do not want another such scene of cowardice and infamy taking place here. If the authorities in this country have reached the level of the most absurd cruelties, I prefer to take responsibility, redeeming a debt of the heart for the remains of this venerated apostle, murdered with the collaboration of your criminal lack of conscience."

"Don't you want to consult the authorities of Sebaste about the matter?" asked one of them timidly.

"Certainly not," she replied, with audacious serenity. "When the minds of a government are poisoned, the hearts of the governed suffer from the same venom. We would wait in vain for any action on behalf of the humble and unfortunate, because Judea is under the tyranny of a cruel and sinister man. At least for today, I wish to oppose the power of wickedness and I call upon the infinite mercy of Jesus to aid me."

Faced with Livia's serene and imperturbable attitude, the Roman soldiers fell silent. Obeying her orders, they placed Simeon's lifeless remains on the huge rustic table used for the customary prayers.

It was then that the same people who had denied the old master of the Gospel gathered piteously around his body, tenderly kissing his shriveled hands, sorry for their cowardice and weakness, and covering his bloody remains with flowers.

Night was falling, but the tenuous light of sunset over the beautiful Samarian landscape had not yet completely left the horizon. An indefinable force seemed to sustain Livia, suggesting to her every measure that was necessary.

Soon, through the Herculean effort of several Samaritans, the heavy stones covering the pit where the three fugitives had been sheltered were removed, while at Livia's orders, the six soldiers dug a shallow grave far from the spot for Sulpicius's body.

The first constellations were shining in the firmament when the measures to deal with the pain-filled events were coming to an end.

As they carried away the old man's remains, which Livia herself had wrapped in a white linen shroud, she made it a point to pray, entreating the Lord to receive the generous soul of his valiant apostle into his Kingdom of Light and Truth.

She knelt like an angelic form next to the humble, rustic bench where Jesus' servant had sat so many times among his leafy and beloved olive trees. All those present, including the soldiers themselves – who felt overcome with a mysterious fear – also fell to their knees, accompanying her act of reverence, while in the light of a few torches blew the light scented breezes of the beautiful starry nights of Samaria of two thousand years ago...

"Brethren," she began, filled with emotion, assuming the leadership of an assembly of believers for the first time, "let us lift up our hearts and thoughts to Jesus!"

A strong feeling seemed to restrain her voice, flooding her eyes with pain-filled tears.

But as if invisible and powerful forces animated her, she continued serenely:

"Jesus, meek and divine Master, this is the glorious day when a valiant apostle of your Kingdom has departed for heaven ... He was our protector here on earth, our support and our hope, O Lord! ... In his faith we found the strength we needed, and it was in his compassionate heart that we were able to drink in the consolation we needed! ... But you deemed it time for Simeon to rest in your loving and compassionate bosom! Like you, he suffered the torments of the cross and in the dolorous sacrifice of his bitter testimony, he showed the same trust in Divine Providence ... Receive him, O Lord, into your Kingdom of Peace and Mercy! Simeon was blessed because of his pain, his moral courage and the grievous afflictions he bore with the courage and faith that you taught us ... Uphold him in the light of the Paradise of your unquenchable love, and let us, exiles in longing and sorrow, learn the enlightened lesson or your valiant, apostle from Samaria! ... If some day you find us also to be worthy of the same sacrifice, strengthen our spirit so that we may prove the excellence of your teachings to the world, helping us to die with bravery through your peace and your truth, like your loving missionary to whom we offer the homage of our love and acknowledgement at this time."

She paused briefly and then continued:

"O Jesus, to you who came into this world for those who were desperate for salvation, uplifting the sickest and most unfortunate, we also pray for the criminal who did not hesitate to trample your laws of fraternity and love by torturing an innocent man, and who was carried off by death to face your justice. We wish to forget his infamy, as you forgave your executioners from the top of the shameful cross of martyrdom ... Help us, O Lord, to understand and practice your teachings!"

Livia got up, uncovered the apostle's body and kissed his hands for the last time, murmuring tenderly through tears:

"Goodbye my master, my protector, my friend ... May Jesus receive your illuminated and upright spirit into his Kingdom of immortal light, and may my poor soul benefit from your lesson of faith and brave heroism!" Lying in an improvised coffin, Simeon's lifeless body was carried to its final resting place. Several torches had been lit for the bitter and sorrowful rite.

And whereas the body of the lictor Sulpicius was lowered into the damp ground with no aid other than the cooperation of his soldiers, the noble old man was laid to rest in front of his temple and house, among the gentle breezes of the valley in the refreshing shade of the olive trees that were so dear to him!

Livia dismissed the governor's soldiers, and guarded by brave and dedicated men, she spent the rest of the night in the company of Ana and her little daughter, in deep meditation and sorrowful reflection.

At daybreak they left the valley of Shechem for good, accompanied by one of Simeon's neighbors. They headed for Capernaum, taking with them numerous lessons for the rest of their lives.

Aware that retaliation from the administrative authorities would not be long in coming, they returned by different roads that proved to be valuable shortcuts, without going near Nain to change horses. After a few hours at a steady gait, they reached the tranquil manor house, where they rested from the blows they had suffered.

Livia paid her dedicated travel companion generously and retired to her rooms, where, upon a costly base, she set the small wooden cross that the apostle had given her a few hours before his bloody martyrdom.

A few days had passed since the ill-fated events. When he received all the details of what had happened, Pontius Pilate

bellowed with savage hatred. Realizing he was facing powerful enemies in the persons of Publius Lentulus and his wife, he sought to set the mechanism of sinister retaliation in motion from the opposite side. He retired immediately to his palace in Samaria and made all the inhabitants of the region pay very dearly for the lictor's death, humiliating them with debasing and shameful measures. Heinous murders were committed among the members of the valley's peaceful population. The web of crimes and cruelty of Pilate's vengeful and dark mind spread all the way to Sebaste and other more advanced centers.

Let us remain in Capernaum, however, and await someone's arrival.

A few days later, the senator returned from his journey through Palestine.

Livia told him what had happened in his absence. Publius Lentulus listened to her in silence. As he became aware of the events, he felt seized with indignation and revolt against the administrator of Judea, not only for his political improprieties, but also because of the extreme personal antipathy that he felt for him. In light of what had happened, he decided not to hesitate a second to prosecute him ruthlessly, as one who must pursue the cruelest of enemies.

The reader might suppose that, in the sanctuary of his home and family, the proud Roman's heart would have been touched and his sentiments changed with regard to his wife, of whom he presumed to have the most flagrant proofs of disloyalty and perjury. But Publius Lentulus was human, and in this precarious and pitiable condition, he had to be a product of his time, education and milieu.

On hearing his wife's final words, which she spoke in the moving tone of someone asking for support and a tender gesture, he replied sternly:

"Livia, I rejoice in your attitude and implore the gods for your regeneration. Your conduct shows me the reality of your change after your crashing downfall, witnessed with my own eyes. You know very well that as far as I'm concerned, my wife no longer exists; however, I praise the mother of my children and feel comforted, because even if you have not awakened in time to be happy, you have awakened to the possibility of going on living ... Your repulsion for this cruel man, although too late, has led me to believe in your maternal dedication. And that is enough!"

These words, pronounced in a tone of superiority and curtness, showed Livia that the emotional separation would continue, irreparably.

Shaken in the emotions of her moral sacrifice, she withdrew to her room, prostrating herself before Simeon's cross with a dispirited and weakened soul. There, she meditated in anguish on her distressing situation. But at a certain moment she saw that the humble memento of the apostle from Samaria was radiating a kindly and resplendent light while at the same time a soft, gentle voice whispered in her ears:

"My daughter, do not expect the happiness that the world cannot give you! There, all good fortune is like fleeting mist, undone in the heat of the passions or shattered by the devastating breath of the most baleful delusions! However, the Kingdom of divine mercy waits, because in the dwelling places of the Lord there is enough light for the holiest hopes of your maternal heart to bloom! Do not expect from the world more than a crown of the thorns of sacrifice."

The senator's wife was not surprised by the phenomenon. Knowing by hearsay of the Lord's resurrection, she had the full conviction that it was the redeemed soul of Simeon, who, in her view had returned from the light of the Kingdom of God to comfort her heart.

For weeks on end, Publius Lentulus received visits from numerous Samaritans who came to request forceful measures against Pontius Pilate's flagrant disregard of the law. Pilate was living in his palace in Samaria – where he rarely stayed otherwise – and was ordering the murder or enslavement of many people as a revenge for the death of the one he considered the best courtier of his house.

Some time later, Comenius returned from his trip to Rome with a suitable teacher for little Flavia. Besides this notable tutor, who was sent by the loving solicitude of Flaminius Severus, other news also reached the senator which he considered comforting. Because of his request, the highest authorities of the Empire had decided on the return of Salvius Lentulus and his family to the seat of the Imperial government, with his friend asking him privately to send positive information as to the administration of Pilate in Judea so that the Senate could seek his removal.

In response, Comenius returned to Rome some time later, with a major report to Flaminius describing all the cruelties practiced by Pilate among the Samaritans. Because of the distance, the proceedings dragged on in the administrative offices for a long time. Finally, however, in the year 35 the Procurator of Judea was called to Rome, where he was dismissed from all the functions he had exercised in the Imperial government. He was exiled to Vienna, in Gall, where he committed suicide three years later, afflicted by remorse, hardship and sorrow.

With his hopes as a father, Publius Lentulus remained in the same dwelling in Galilee, dedicating himself almost exclusively to his studies, his administrative duties and the education of his daughter, who, early on, had shown literary inclinations along with considerable gifts of intelligence.

Livia kept Ana under her guardianship and both of them continued praying before the cross that Simeon had given them

in his final moments, entreating Jesus for the necessary strength for the arduous struggles of life.

The Lentulus family waited in vain for destiny to bring them the enchanting smile of little Marcus once again; and while the senator and his daughter prepared themselves for the world alongside Livia and Ana, who had placed their hopes in Heaven, let us allow more than ten years to pass in the pain-filled serenity of the villa of Capernaum, ten silent and sad years that passed slowly by.

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

I
The Death of Flaminius

The year 46 was passing without incident.

Once again we find our characters in Capernaum immersed in relative peacefulness.

The administrative authorities in Rome had changed. Publius Lentulus, however, supported by the prestige of his name and Flaminius Severus's considerable political influence in the Senate, retained his commission in Palestine, where he enjoyed all his political rights and privileges in the provincial administration.

In spite of his great desire to return to the seat of the imperial government, the senator had remained there hoping in vain for a chance to see his son again, although time had continued to keep him hidden away in the realm of mysterious shadow. In recent years Publius had completely lost hope, realizing that by now Marcus Lentulus would be in his early adolescence and unrecognizable to him.

At other times, the proud patrician considered the possibility that his son was no longer even alive; that, surely, the perverse and criminal minds that had snatched him from his home would have slain the handsome boy, fearing the consequent inexorable punishment. Nevertheless, deep within his soul he had a pulsating intuition that Marcus was still alive, and therefore, among his daily indecisions and alternatives, he had resolved above all to hearken to the voice of paternal duty and invest every resource to find him, even if it meant staying there indefinitely and contrary to his most wished-for and sincere plans.

Publius's features had changed only slightly, although thirteen years had passed since the grievous events of 33. His hair still had its full natural color and only a few nearly imperceptible lines marked his deeply austere face. A calm sadness invariably hovered over his countenance, leading him to isolate himself almost completely from normal life to immerse himself in a sea of papers and studies. His only and greatest concern was his daughter's education, and he sought to endow her with the highest qualities of intellect and sentiment. His home life was the same, although his heart often begged him to renew his marriage bonds and make up for those thirteen years of lack of intimacy. Livia, in turn, had completely renounced any and all distractions, except those of her domestic life and her fervent and sincere beliefs. Alone with his thoughts, Publius Lentulus let them wander through the sweetest and most distant memories. In these hours of introspection he heard the voice of his conscience rising from his heart to his head, appealing to his unyielding reason to lift its prejudices. Pride, in its unbreakable rigidity, always won, however. Something deep down told him that his wife was blameless, but the spirit of his biased vanity would immediately bring to mind the unforgettable scene of his wife leaving Pilate's private room in disguise, while he could still

hear the horror of Fulvia Procula's mocking words in her strange and ominous act of slander.

Livia isolated herself, wrapped in a veil of sad resignation like someone awaiting supernatural action, which never appears in the restless course of a human life. Her husband kept her close to her daughter only to fulfill her role as a mother, but he never let her interfere in any way with his plans and educational directives.

For Livia, that harsh blow was the worst hardship of her life. The slander itself did not hurt her so much, but in her eyes, to be regarded as dispensable to her daughter constituted the most painful humiliation of her life.

For that reason she shielded herself more in her faith, trying to enrich her suffering soul with the light of her fervent and sincere beliefs.

Far from retaining her physical vigor as was the case with her husband, her face, with its heavy load of suffering and bitterness, testified to the ravages of time. A few silvery strands touched her pain-sanctified brow, while her deep eyes shone with a mysterious brilliance, as if their luminosity had intensified from gazing so much at the endless heavens. Although attesting to premature aging, her facial features still revealed her former beauty, now transformed into an indefinable and noble expression of adversity and virtue. Once she found herself isolated from her dearest affections in the home, far from any spiritual contact with her daughter – a situation that afflicted her grieving heart even more – she had asked only one thing of her husband: to be allowed to continue her Christian practices with Ana, who had become so dedicated to Livia as to spurn her own opportunities to raise a family. The senator gave her his full permission and even provided financial resources to assist the numerous followers of the doctrine who discreetly came to her seeking her material support in their initiatives of renewal.

Along with mother and father, we must also report on Flavia Lentulia, last seen as a timid and sickly child.

Flavia was now in the splendor of her twenty-two years. With the strong personal expression of her character and spiritual training, she displayed the fruits of the education her father had given her.

The senator's daughter was Livia in the charming grace of her physical attributes and Publius Lentulus in her soul. Educated by a string of eminent teachers chosen by Severus, who never forgot his distant friends, she knew her native language thoroughly and spoke Greek with the same ease, keeping in touch with the most famous authors by means of constant contact with her father's intellectuality.

The intellectual education of a young Roman woman in that era was without a doubt secondary and deficient. The exciting spectacles of the amphitheaters, as well as the lack of any serious occupation for women due to the unending supply of low-cost slaves, considerably jeopardized the education of Roman women at the upper levels of the Empire, a time when the female soul debased itself in scandals, moral depravity and dissolute living.

The senator, however, made it a point to be an old-fashioned man. He had not lost track of the heroic and exalted virtues of the unforgettable matrons in their family traditions. Therefore, avoiding the current tendencies, he had prepared his daughter for social life with the best education possible, although he also instilled in her heart the pride, vanity and all the prejudices of the time.

The young woman loved her mother with great tenderness, but because of the orders of her father, who invariably kept her close by in his study rooms or on his customary short trips, it was obvious that her favor fell on him. She believed she had inherited from her father the most resplendent and noble qualities, and

thus she could not understand the sweet humility and heroic resignation of her so very dignified and unhappy mother.

The senator had sought to develop Flavia's literary tendencies and to facilitate her intellectual acquisitions; he admired her ease of expression, especially her gift of poetry, held in such high regard at the time.

Time was ticking away in relative calm for everyone.

Now and then the possibility of returning to Rome was mentioned, but the realization of this plan was always postponed in light of the hope of finding the missing boy.

On a mild day in March, when the lush trees were covered with blossoms, we find in the senator's house a messenger who had just arrived urgently from Rome.

It was an emissary of Flaminius Severus who, in a long letter, communicated the precarious state of his health to his friend, adding that he wished to see him once more before dying. Moving appeals were contained in this private document, prompting Publius to seriously consider the matter. What sealed his decision, however, was a separate letter signed by Calpurnia. In an outpouring of emotion, the venerable woman informed him of her husband's state of health, which to her was extremely precarious. She further pointed out their sorrow and anguishing worries regarding their children, who, in the full bloom of their youth, had surrendered to the worst dissipation, following the trends of the social depravity of the times. At the end of her moving letter, she asked her friend to come back to Rome to help them with their ordeal so that his friendship and fatherly interest would serve as a moderating influence on Plinius and Agrippa, who, already grown men, had allowed themselves to be carried away by the whirlwind of the most disgraceful dissolute pleasures.

Publius Lentulus did not hesitate for an instant.

He showed his daughter the letters, and after examining the details of their contents together, he informed Livia of his plan to return to Rome at the earliest opportunity.

The noble woman then thought about how different her life would be in the great city of the Caesars with the ideas she now embraced. She asked Jesus to give her the courage she would need to win all the conflicts she would have to endure in Roman society in order to keep her faith intact.

Their return to Rome did not entail a long wait. The same emissary took the senator's instructions to his friends in the Empire's Capital, and very soon a galley was waiting in Caesarea to take the Lentulus family back after a stay of nearly fifteen years in Palestine.

We need not mention the little incidents of the return voyage, accomplished in the molds of ancient travel, its monotony allied to the heartrending mistreatment of the slaves.

We must add, however, that the day before their arrival the senator called his daughter and wife, addressing them discreetly:

"Before we arrive in port, I want to explain my decision regarding our poor Marcus.

"For these many years I have not said a word about this matter to my dear friends in Rome, and I do not want to be considered a bad father in our social circle. There is only one thing that would cause me to return: the one that is taking us back at this moment. In fact, there could be no other justification for a father to forsake a son in that region, even if tormented by the uncertainty that he is still alive.

"Therefore, I have decided to tell those who ask me about it that my son has been dead for more than ten years, which, in fact, he would be for us because we would not be able to recognize him even if he did reappear.

"If they knew of our heartbreak, there would be no lack of impostors wanting to deceive our good faith and exploit our family sentiments."

Both women agreed that this was the best approach. A few minutes later, the port of Ostia came into view. It was now beautifully improved, with significant and monumental constructions ordered by the zeal of Emperor Claudius.

They felt none of the contentment one would normally feel in such circumstances.

Their departure fifteen years ago had been a hymn of hope with sweet expectations for the future, but their return was filled with the bitter silence of the most pain-filled realities.

Besides the disenchantment of their married life, Publius and Livia did not see among the friendly faces waiting for them the silhouettes of Flaminius and Calpurnia, whom they considered their beloved brother and sister.

However, two pleasant, strong young men in pristine togas greeted them immediately, approaching with their small comfortable boats as soon as the ship had anchored. The senator and his wife recognized these young men right away, embracing them affectionately.

They were Plinius and his brother, sent by their parents to welcome the dear ones gone for so long.

When introduced to Flavia, they both made an instinctive gesture of admiration, remembering the day of departure when they had settled her into her bunk amid the moaning and grimaces of a sick child.

The young woman was also impressed by them; she had only vague memories of them among the distant recollections of childhood. It was mainly Plinius Severus, the younger, who impressed her more. At twenty-six, he conveyed the same elegant and distinctive demeanor she had idealized in the hero of her feminine imagination.

In a glance, one could see that the young man was not indifferent to the same emotions. After exchanging their first impressions of the trip and Flaminius Severus's health – which his sons regarded as extremely serious – Plinius offered his arm to the young woman as the slightly jealous Agrippa cut in:

"What's this, Plinius? Flavia might think you're being too forward!"

"Now Agrippa," he replied with a frank smile, "you're too biased by the formalities of public life. Flavia won't find our customs odd, because she's a patrician by birth, and in any case I wasn't born for the protocols of the State that are so much to your taste!"

To these words, spoken in obvious good humor, Publius Lentulus added his own, comforted by his favorite surroundings:

"Let's go, my boys!"

He offered his arm to his wife to play out the farce of his marital happiness in the ordinary life of the city. At ease in matters of the heart, Plinius followed, aiding the young woman with his strong and conquering arm. Together with Agrippa, all went ashore in order to rest for a while before heading directly to Rome. The Severus brothers had overseen all arrangements with utmost care and willing dedication.

Livia had not forgotten Ana and had provided for her comfort along with the other household servants during the entire length of the route that separated them from their residence.

As they headed toward the city, the senator thought that at last he was going to see his beloved friend again. For a long time now he had been cherishing the idea of confiding all the sorrows of his married life to him in person, revealing with frankness and sincerity all his concerns about the facts that were separating him from his wife in the intimacy of their home. He was thirsty for Flaminius's loving words and consoling explanations because he

felt that he still loved his wife above everything, in spite of all the vexation he had experienced. Not fully convinced of her downfall, it was only his male pride that kept him from a reconciliation that was becoming more compelling and necessary by the day.

Soon, they were in front of their former residence. It had been beautifully decorated to receive them. Numerous servants were bustling about, while the newly-arrived family became reacquainted with their most intimate and familiar spots.

Looked after by dedicated and commendable slaves, the palace on Aventinus had been waiting fifteen years for its owners.

A frugal meal was served on the triclinium in the company of the Severus brothers, who waited for their friends afterwards so that they could all go together to Flaminius's house, where the ailing man was anxiously awaiting them.

At one point Plinius, wanting to offer a bit of interesting and pleasant news, said to the senator:

"We have been acquainted with your uncle Salvius Lentulus and his family for quite some time now. They are living near the Forum."

"My uncle?" asked a startled Publius, as if the memories of Fulvia had brought a horde of ghosts to mind. But at the same time, as if doing everything possible to diffuse his sorrows, he spoke with feigned serenity:

"Ah! That's right! He returned from Palestine more than twelve years ago..."

At that moment Agrippa intervened, as if to pay his brother back for his forward attitude earlier that day:

"By the way, it seems that Plinius has hopes of marrying his daughter Aurelia. They have been seeing each other for quite some time now."

Flavia glared at Agrippa as if between her and Flaminius's younger son strong ties of sentimental commitment had

already been established according to the mysterious laws of psychic affinities.

While this duel of emotions was taking place, Plinius also glared at his brother with near hatred, showing the impulsiveness of his soul. He replied emphatically, as if defending himself from an unjustifiable accusation in the presence of the woman of his choice:

"Not so, Agrippa. My relationship with Aurelia has no basis other than that of pure mutual friendship, especially since I think that marriage is highly unlikely at this point in my life."

Agrippa flashed a mischievous smile. The senator was not blind to what was going on and calmed their tempers:

"All right, boys, we'll talk about my uncle later. I'm eager to see my dear friend again, and we have no time to lose."

A few minutes later a train of litters was on its way to the noble residence of the Severus family, where Flaminius was anxiously awaiting his friend.

His countenance no longer displayed its former mobility and arresting expression of energy, but in compensation a great peacefulness radiated from his eyes, touching everyone who visited him during those final days of his earthly struggles. The expression on his face was that of a stricken and prostrate fighter, exhausted from combating the mysterious forces of death. The doctors did not offer the slightest hope of a cure, considering his profound physical debility combined with a grave disorder in his cardiac system. The slightest emotions affected his condition, causing the utmost apprehension in his family.

From time to time his serene and tranquil eyes would stare attentively at the doorway, as if he were eagerly expecting someone. Finally, noises coming from the vestibule announced to his heart that a fifteen-year absence between him and the friends he had never forgotten was about to end.

Calpurnia, who also looked drained, embraced Livia and Publius in tears and held Flavia close to her as if she were welcoming a daughter.

Right there in the vestibule they exchanged greetings and spoke of their many concerns and how much they had missed each other, until Publius decided to leave the two friends in their candid affectionate elation and went with Agrippa to one of the rooms close to the tablinum, where he greeted his great friend with tears of joy.

Flaminius Severus was very thin and at times his words were cut off because of his shortness of breath, giving the impression that he did not have much longer to live.

Knowing his father's pleasure in the intimate company of his loyal friend, Agrippa withdrew from the large room, where the shadows of twilight were beginning to enter whimsically as if entering the sacred silence of the nave of a church.

Publius Lentulus was shocked to find his old companion in such a state. He had not expected to see him so depleted. He knew that it was now his turn to help with his advice by uplifting Flaminius's bodily and spiritual strength with his warm and loving encouragement.

Once alone, he contemplated his friend and mentor as if he were looking at a sick child.

Flaminius, in turn, looked at Publius with tear-filled eyes and took his hands in his, letting him know that there, in that moment, he was welcoming a beloved son.

With a gentle and delicate movement, he tried to sit up more comfortably, and supporting himself on Lentulus's shoulders, he said emotionally:

"Publius, you shall no longer greet your energetic and resolute companion of days gone by. I feel that I have been waiting for you before surrendering my soul peacefully to the

gods. With an upright conscience and honest thoughts, I believe my mission on earth is fulfilled.

"For more than a year I have foreseen that irreversible and fatal moment, which now, with my ardent desire satisfied, must be approaching with the speed of lightning. But I didn't want to leave without clasping you in my arms and telling you my final secrets on my deathbed."

"But Flaminius," replied his friend with grief-filled calmness, "everything justifies my believing in your immediate improvement. We are all awaiting the blessing of the gods so that we may yet enjoy your indispensable company for a long time in this world."

"No, my good friend, don't delude yourself with such thoughts and suppositions. Our soul never deceives us when the darkness of the grave is approaching ... It won't be long before I enter the mystery of the great night, but I firmly believe that the gods will welcome me with the light of their auroras[38]!"

And allowing his deep, serene glance to wander about the room, as if the marble walls were opening up to the infinite, Flaminius Severus withdrew for a moment into his inner thoughts and then continued as if he wished to take the conversation in a new direction:

"Do you remember that night when you confided the details of your mysterious dream to me at the peak of your painful emotions?"

"Oh, I remember, all right!" replied Publius Lentulus, recalling in an inexplicable way not only the distant conversation that had decided the trip to Palestine but also another dream in which he had witnessed the same inexplicable phenomenon on the night of his encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. Upon

[38] In Greco-Roman mythology, the personification of the dawn. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

remembering that wondrous personality, his heart quaked, but he did everything to avoid showing any stronger and more painful feelings to his friend, adding with apparent calmness: "But why such a question? I'm more than convinced – as you yourself were – that it was nothing more than the simple impressions of an irrelevant fantasy."

"Fantasy?" replied Flaminius, as if he had found a new formula for the truth. "I have completely changed my mind. Illness has its beautiful and grand benefits also. Confined to my bed for many months, I developed the habit of invoking the protection of Themis[39] so that, before the incorruptible justice of the gods, she would see in my sufferings nothing but the painful results of my merits. And then, one night, I experienced what you did.

"I don't remember having retained any concern about your story, but the fact is, around two months ago I felt myself carried off in a dream to that same time of the Cataline rebellion, and I saw the veracity of all the things you had told me sixteen years ago. I even saw your forefather, Publius Lentulus Sura. He was like a portrait of you, so great was the similarity, especially now that you are forty-four years old and your features firmly set.

"It's interesting that I found myself at your side, walking with you the same road of clamorous iniquities. I remember seeing us handing out unfair and merciless judgments, ordering the torture of many of our fellow beings ... What tormented me most, though, was your terrible cruelty in inflicting blindness on many of our political adversaries. You took part personally in burning your defenseless victims' eyes out with a hot iron as they screamed horrifically!"

Publius Lentulus's eyes opened wide in astonishment as he too shared in those memories that lay dormant deep in his darkened soul. Finally, he replied:

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[39] In Greek religion, the personification of justice, goddess of wisdom and good counsel, and the interpreter of the gods' will. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

"My good friend, calm you heart ... Such impressions must be vestiges of some strong emotion that has remained in the back of your mind as the result of my talk with you on that night so long ago!"

Flaminius Severus, however, smiled slightly, as if understanding Publius's benevolent and consoling intent, and replied with serene kindness:

"I must tell you that these pictures do not really terrify me, and I'm only telling you of this complex of emotions because I'm certain that I will leave this life and that you will stay in this world, perhaps for a long time. It's possible that the recollections of your soul will emerge again, and then I want you to accept the religious truth of the Greeks and Egyptians. I now believe that we live many lives in many different bodies. I feel that my poor body is ready to give out; however, my thought is as alive as ever, and only under such circumstances do I presume to understand the great mystery of our existence. It weighs on my heart to have practiced evil in the dark past, although more than a century has passed since the sad events of our spiritual visions; even so, I'm here in the presence of the gods with a peaceful conscience."

Publius listened to him attentively, both grieved and moved. He tried to say something comforting, but his voice seemed to die in his throat, impeded by the emotions of that painful moment.

Flaminius pulled him to his heart, his eyes filled with tears, and whispered in his ear:

"My friend, have no doubt about what I have said ... I believe that these are my final hours ... All your documents are in my office, as well as a report on all the business matters I conducted in your name in your absence, in addition to those regarding our problems of a political and financial nature. You won't have any problems expediently cataloging all the papers I am referring to..."

"But Flaminius," replied Publius with forceful serenity, "I think we'll have plenty of time to take care of that."

Just then, Livia, her daughter, Calpurnia and her sons gathered around the noble patient, bringing him friendly smiles and consoling words. The sick man showed signs of vitality and joy to each of them, addressing Livia's despondency and Flavia's exuberant beauty with kind, warm words.

When they were alone again, the benevolent senator, disfigured by the illness, exclaimed kindly from between the white linen sheets:

"Those, my friend, are the smiling butterflies of love and youth that time makes disappear so swiftly in its maelstrom of impieties."

Lowering his voice as if to divulge a closely guarded secret, he continued hesitantly:

"I'm taking many concerns about my poor sons to the grave. I have given them everything I could in terms of an education, and although I realize that they both have unselfish and sincere sentiments, I've noticed that their hearts are victims of the painful transitions of the times we're living in, where we have the discontent of seeing the most degrading abasement of the dignity of home and family.

"Agrippa has been doing all he can to comply with my counsel by dedicating himself to the work of the State; but Plinius has had the misfortune of allowing himself to be seduced by treacherous and disloyal friends who wish only to ruin him and drag him into the worst excesses in the questionable circles of our highest social levels. He has been taking his spirit of adventure too far.

"Both of them have aggravated me a lot with the things they do, testifying to faulty notions of individual responsibility. Since they have squandered a large part of our fortune, I don't

know what is in store for my poor Calpurnia if the gods do not grant me the grace of coming for her soon in her loneliness and sorrow after my death!"

"But," Publius replied earnestly, "I think they are truly worthy of the father the gods granted them: it shows in their generous kindness and nobility of attitude."

"At any rate, my friend, you mustn't forget that you have been gone from Rome for a long time and that many new things took place in the meantime.

"It seems that we are quickly spiraling down to a level of absolute decadence in our family customs as well as in our educational processes, which, in my opinion, have gone bankrupt!"

As if he wanted to focus the conversation once again on matters of an immediate, practical nature, he stressed:

"Now that I see your daughter resplendent with youthfulness and energy, I have renewed my former plan to bring her into the circle of our family group.

"It has always been my wish that Plinius marry her, but he seems inclined to commit himself to Salvius's daughter, despite Calpurnia's opposition, not because of your uncle, who we have always regarded as worthy and respectable, but because of his wife, who does not seem willing to abandon the old ideas and conduct of her past. I must remember, however, that I still have Agrippa to solidify my future hopes.

"Some day, if you can, do not forget my suggestion as I lay near death!"

"OK, Flaminius, but don't worry about it. Give time a chance, because there will be no lack of opportunities for discussing the matter," replied Publius Lentulus, moved.

Just then, Agrippa entered the alcove and addressed his father affectionately:

"Dear father, the messenger you sent to Massilia[40] has just arrived, bringing the information you wanted about Saul."

"Does he have anything to tell us about his arrival?" asked the sick man with kind interest.

"No. The courier only said that Saul left for Palestine soon after consolidating his fortune with the latest commercial profits. He also said that he decided to go to Judea to see his father, who lives on the outskirts of Jerusalem."

"Of course," said the sick man, resigned. "That being the case, pay the messenger and don't concern yourself any more about my earlier wishes."

As he was listening to them, Publius wracked his brain trying to remember something that he couldn't define exactly. The name Saul was not unknown to him. The fact that his father lived near Jerusalem enabled him to finally recall the characters from his memories with absolute fidelity. He remembered an incident when he had to punish a young Jew by that name on the outskirts of the city, sending him to the galleys because of a rash act. He also remembered the moment when a Jewish farmer had demanded the prisoner's freedom, claiming him to be his son. He felt a vague uneasiness in his heart and asked purposely:

"Saul? Isn't that a common name in Judea?"

"Yes," replied Flaminius serenely, "he used to be one of my slaves but I granted him his freedom. He was a Jewish captive and was still quite young when he was bought by Valerius in the market for the boys' bigas for the cheapest price of four thousand sestertii. He was so good at his job that, after my sons had won several prizes on the Field of Mars, I decided to give him his freedom. I provided him with the necessary resources to live and develop undertakings on his own. It seems that the hand of the

[40] Now Marseille – Publisher.

gods blessed him at the right time because he now owns a solid fortune as the result of his effort and work."

Publius Lentulus was silent, relieved inwardly, since according to news received by the agents of the provincial government, his prisoner had fled to his father's home, thereby avoiding slavery.

Night had fallen.

The visitor remembered that he was hoping he could talk at length with Flaminius concerning a number of matters such as his painful marital situation, the mysterious disappearance of his little son, and his encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. But he could see that Flaminius was exhausted, and so it was fair and necessary to postpone his bitter and painful confidences.

Filled with consoling hopes, he left the room to wait until the following day.

The two friends exchanged a long, meaningful look as they said their goodbyes, which now seemed back to normal, just like the affectionate daily farewells of times gone by.

Comforting words and friendly promises of alliance and affection were exchanged before Calpurnia led the visitors off to the vestibule with her benevolent and welcoming kindness.

However, in the early hours of the next morning a hurried messenger stopped at the door of the Lentulus mansion with alarming and sorrowful news.

Flaminius Severus had worsened unexpectedly. The doctors were unable to give his family members the least bit of hope. All his seeming improvement had disappeared. An inexplicable force had destabilized his organism, and no remedy could stop his anguished affliction.

Within a few hours, Publius Lentulus and his family found themselves once more in the comfortable abode of their friends.

As Publius anxiously entered the room of his old companion in the earthly struggle, Livia spoke to Calpurnia in the intimacy of another room:

"My friend, have you ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth?"

The proud matron, who never lost the thread of her family vanities even in the most anguishing worries, widened her eyes and exclaimed:

"Why do you ask?"

"Because," Livia answered humbly, "Jesus is merciful to all those who suffer and I cannot forget his goodness, now that we are undergoing such harsh and painful trials."

"I think, dear Livia," responded Calpurnia gravely, "that you forgot all the recommendations I gave you before you left for Palestine, because, from what you are saying, it looks like you have accepted in good faith the absurd theories of equality and humility, incompatible with our most common traditions. You have allowed yourself to be carried away by the deceiving notions of the slaves' erroneous beliefs."

"No, it's not that. I'm referring to the Christian faith, which encourages us in life's struggles and consoles our tormented hearts during the harshest and bitterest trials."

"This belief has reached the seat of the Empire, and it looks as if it has been rejected outright by our most sensible and illustrious men."

"But I met Jesus personally, and his doctrine is one of love, fraternity and forgiveness... Since I knew you were rightly fearful for Flaminius, I appealed to the prophet of Nazareth, who, in Galilee, was the providence of all the afflicted and all sufferers!"

"Listen, my child, you know that fraternity and forgiving wrongs are not compatible at all with our ideas of honor, fatherland and family, and what amazes me most is how easy it was for Publius to let you have such close contact with the

erroneous conceptions of Judea – to the point of changing your moral personality, if I may say so."

"Even so ..."

Livia was about to do her best to explain her points of view regarding the matter, when Agrippa entered the office unexpectedly, urging with the strongest emotion:

"Mother, come quickly, right now! It looks like Father is dying!"

In an instant, both women were in the dying man's bedroom. His eyes were fixed as if unexpectedly assailed by an unstoppable collapse.

Publius Lentulus was holding the dying man's hands, looking anxiously into the depths of his eyes.

Bit by bit, however, Flaminius's chest seemed to move once again to the impulse of his deep and painful breathing. His eyes suddenly displayed a forceful flash of life and consciousness, as if a lamp in his brain had turned on again in a final movement. He looked around at his family and beloved friends as they leaned over him, distraught and anxious. Understanding the gravity of the moment, a dear doctor who had been treating him withdrew to the atrium while around the dying man only the labored breathing of our characters could be heard.

Flaminius cast his bright and indefinable gaze over all their faces, as if he were looking most urgently for his wife and sons, saying in interrupted phrases:

"Calpurnia, this is ... my final hour ... and I give thanks to the gods ... that I have a clear and peaceful conscience ... I shall wait for you in eternity ... when Jupiter ... deems it right ... to call you to my side..."

The venerable woman hid her face in her hands, giving vent to her tears, unable to say a word.

"Don't cry..." he continued, as if to make the most of his final moments. "Death ... is the solution ... when life ... no longer has a remedy... for our ills..."

He looked at both his sons, who were watching him anxiously with tears streaming from their eyes, and took the younger one's hand, murmuring:

"My Plinius ... I would like ... to see you happy ... very happy... Is it your intention to marry Salvius's daughter?"

Plinius understood his father's allusions in that grave and decisive moment, and gave a slight negative sign with his head as he focused his wide, burning eyes on Flavia Lentulia, as if to indicate his preference to his father.

With the profound spiritual lucidity of those who are approaching death, and with a full grasp of the situation and his duties, the dying man understood his beloved son's silent wish, and taking the hand of the young woman, who leaned tenderly toward his breast, clasped both their hands to his heart, murmuring with inner joy:

"This is one ... more reason ... for me to leave ... in peace ... You, Agrippa ... must also be ... very happy ... and you ... my dear ... Publius... will live ... with Livia ..."

A loud, gulping sound escaped from him abruptly, and a succession of violent and painful hiccups forced him to silence, while Calpurnia knelt and covered his hands with kisses.

Livia also knelt down and looked to the heavens as if wanting to discover their mysteries. Before her eyes, she saw that the death chamber was filled with luminous figures and other indefinable shades gliding peacefully around the dying man. From the depths of her soul she prayed to Jesus for strength and peace, light and mercy for the great friend's departure. At that moment, she saw the radiant form of Simeon in the distance, surrounded by a bluish and resplendent light.

Flaminius was in the throes of death.

With each minute, his eyes became glassier and more colorless. His whole body perspired profusely, soaking the pure white sheets.

Livia noticed that all the shades were kneeling and only the imposing figure of Simeon had remained standing, as if he were a divine sentinel placing his radiant hands on the prostrated head of the dying man. She saw that his lips were half-opened in prayer while at the same time sweet words came clearly to her spiritual ears:

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom of mercy come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!"

Flaminius Severus breathed his last. A marble-like pallor covered his facial features while at the same time an infinite serenity appeared on his cadaverous mask, as if his benevolent soul had departed for the mansions of the blessed and righteous.

With her belief and faith, only Livia was able to remain calm among the others surrounding her in dolorous grief. Publius Lentulus, in moving tears, was certain that he had lost his best and greatest friend. Never again would Flaminius's voice speak to him of the most beautiful philosophical problems, about the grand issues of destiny and suffering in the incessant streams of life. As the doors of the palace were being opened for Roman society to pay its respects, and as solemn funeral rites were being observed, imploring the protection of the dead man's Manes[41], Publius's mind pondered the painful reality of one of the most beautiful, loving pages having been torn away forever from the book of his life in the thick and impenetrable darkness of the secrets of the tomb.

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[41] Spirits of ancestors: in ancient Roman religion, the divine spirits of the dead. http://encarta.msn.com. –Tr.

II
Shadow and Nuptials

Numerous close friends of Flaminius attended his funeral rites, as well as various social and political representatives of all the organizations to which his praiseworthy and illustrious name had belonged.

Among these many attendees was the figure of praetor Salvius Lentulus. During the posthumous tributes he was accompanied by his wife and daughter, who did all they could to play the part of their feigned grief for both the great senator's death and for Calpurnia, who was immersed in the tears of deepest sorrow.

The members of the Lentulus family met right there in the Severus's villa. Publius's aversion to the presence of his uncle's wife was obvious as the women exchanged condolences with the affected etiquette of social trivialities.

Fulvia and Aurelia were highly displeased at Plinius Severus's affection for Flavia, whom he coddled with special attention to show everyone his heart's preference.

That is why, some time afterward, we find both mother and daughter engaged in a lively discussion about the matter in the privacy of their home, revealing the pettiness of their sentiments. Even though Fulvia's graying hair instilled her with a mark of dignity, she did not allow herself to yield to the arguments of experience and age.

"I too was very surprised by Plinius's behavior," said Fulvia maliciously in answer to one of her daughter's questions, "since I had deemed him to be a young man who was zealous in fulfilling his duties. On the other hand, I wasn't at all surprised by Flavia's conduct, because I have always believed that children are doomed to inherit their parents' qualities - especially in this case, where the inheritance is from the mother. It lends an irrefutable certainty to that idea."

"Are you referring to something Livia did in this regard?" asked Aurelia, very interested.

"Yes indeed."

And Fulvia's slanderous imagination proceeded to satisfy her daughter's curiosity. As she told the most improbable and dreadful tales regarding the senator's wife during their stay in Palestine, Aurelia displayed her delight with expressions of sarcasm and irony fueled by the bitterest jealousy. Fulvia concluded her narrative:

"Only your Aunt Claudia could tell you literally what we suffered because of the lies of that woman who now seems so simple and withdrawn, as if she knew nothing about the hardest experiences of this world. We mustn't forget the fact that we are surrounded by persons who are as powerful in politics as they are in craftiness. Besides being a very unhappy husband, your father's nephew is a proud and cruel public man!

"From what I've heard, he corrected his foolish and unfaithful wife after he witnessed her marital betrayal with

his own eyes. All she had to do was make him suffer for her unfaithfulness and all of us Romans in Judea had to pay for the incident with our own dreadful suffering.

"We had a great friend in lictor Sulpicius Tarquinius, who was barbarically murdered in Samaria under tragic circumstances. So far, no one has been able to identify his killers so that they can receive the punishment they deserve ... Even though our family had important interests in Jerusalem, we had to return suddenly to Rome, with serious financial losses for your father. And finally," continued the slanderer venomously, "my brother-in-law Pontius's great heart succumbed to the most abusive and harsh trials ... He was dismissed from the provincial government. Tormented by the deepest humiliation, he was banished to Gaul and committed suicide in Vienna, bringing us unquenchable grief!

"In light of the suffering endured by Claudia because of the baleful influence of that woman, I'm not at all surprised that her daughter is trying to steal your future husband!"

"We must take steps right away so that that doesn't happen, Mother," replied the girl, under the strong effect of her shaky nerves. "I can't go on living without him, without his company ... His kisses help me live in the turmoil of our daily worries."

Fulvia looked up as if to examine the anxiety stamped on her daughter's face more closely, and then replied with a clever and malicious look:

"You've been giving yourself to Plinius like that?"

Trembling with rage, the young woman received the innuendo in keeping with the unfortunate educational principles she had obeyed since birth, and exclaimed furiously:

"Well, what do you think we do when we go to parties and circuses? Do you think I'm any different than other girls my age?"

Raising her voice like someone needing to defend herself by entering a charge against her accuser, she unleashed a torrent of swear words, concluding:

"And you, Mother, haven't you also..."

Fulvia sprang at her daughter, grabbed her by the throat, and said with cold calmness:

"Shut up! Not another word. It wasn't my idea to nurse a viper at my breast!"

However, understanding that the situation could become more painful because of her great guilt as a mother, a wife and a woman, she said in an almost mellifluous voice, as if offering a sad lesson to her daughter:

"Come now, Aurelia! Compose yourself! I simply meant that a woman can't get a man to marry her by giving him everything at once. A high strung, gallant man like Flaminius's son must be won over bit by bit with few concessions and much tenderness.

"You know very well that, before anything else, the first problem in the life of a woman of our times boils down to finding a husband, because the times are bad and we cannot do without the shade of a tree that shelters us from painful surprises on life's bitter road."

"That's for sure," replied the young woman, totally changed thanks to those astute remarks. "What you are telling me is the harsh reality of the matter. Since you have so much experience, what would you suggest for me to realize my desires?"

"Before anything else," replied Fulvia maliciously, "we must resort to the arguments of jealousy, which are always the strongest when there is a more or less sincere interest in securing something in the matter of love. And since you've already given so much to Flaminius's son, see if you can use a circus event to provoke his impulses of envy and spite. Haven't you been courted by questor Britanicus's ward?"

"Emilianus?" the girl asked, interested.

"Yes, Emilianus. He would also be a good partner because his future in the military seems to have excellent prospects. Try to get his attention in front of Plinius so that we can do everything possible to get you the young Severus. After all, he's the one who would hold the most advantages of any that might appear."

"But what if the plan fails and we are disappointed?"

"We can always resort to Araxes, with his potions and magic."

A heavy silence fell on the two as they contemplated the possibility of turning to the dark powers of one of the most famous sorcerers of the age.

Day after day went by, but Flaminius's younger son did not go back to courting the daughter of praetor Salvius Lentulus. Sometime later, when he started frequenting the festive and noisy circuses again, he wasn't surprised when he saw Emilianus with the one he had felt connected to only by the most fragile and artificial ties of lasciviousness and the corrupt habits of the time.

Aurelia, however, could not accept being brushed off and planned the best way to get her revenge at the right time. Because of the endearing feelings arising from Flavia Lentulia's love, Plinius seemed a completely different man. He had willingly avoided the usual debauchery of the epoch, and he also fled his former companions who used to drag him into the whirlwind of all the vices and frivolities. It really seemed like a new power was guiding his life, fashioning his heart anew for the caring and level-headed environment of the family.

At the Lentulus villa, life was proceeding in relative tranquility.

After her husband's death, Calpurnia spent the first few months in the company of her sons, while Plinius and Flavia weaved their romance of hope and love in the light of youth under the blessing of the gods, whom they had not forgotten in the radiant pinnacle of their sweet love.

In order to avoid the distractions of the time, Plinius withdrew as often as possible to his rooms in the Aventine palace and lost himself in painting or sculpture – at which he excelled – modeling beautiful specimens of Venus and Apollo in precious marble and then giving them to Flavia as mementos of his deep love. For her part, Flavia composed delicate poetic jewels, which she played on the lyre with her own hands, offering the flowers of her soul to her idolized betrothed, in whose loving spirit she had placed the most beautiful dreams of her heart.

There was just one person who could not stand that lovely encounter of two twin souls: Agrippa. The second he saw the senator's daughter at the port of Ostia, he thought he had found his future wife. He felt he was the only one qualified for the heart of the young enigmatic and intelligent Roman, on whose rosy face a smile of great goodness was always present, as if Palestine had given her a new beauty that was full of mysterious and singular attraction.

But in light of his brother's plans to marry Flavia, his own plans had failed completely. He had mistakenly thought he had found the woman of his dreams, for her tenderness and caring belonged to his brother alone. Consequently, in response to Plinius Severus's constant presence in the house as he organized his plans for the future, Agrippa wandered into a long series of thoughtless acts, increasingly accentuating the extravagant side of his personality by preferring the most unwholesome company and the most corrupt environments.

In the course of his numerous diversions, he had become seriously ill and required the care of his mother, who watched over her sons with the same affection as always.

Thus, we find him on a beautiful Roman afternoon, on the same terrace where we found Publius Lentulus in sorrowful meditation in the first pages of this book.

Cool, kindly breezes refreshed the twilight, still saturated with the rays of light from the beautiful, hot sun.

At his side, Calpurnia was examining some pieces of wool while glancing at him affectionately. After a while, the venerable woman spoke to him:

"So, my son, let's give thanks to the gods, because I can see that you are much better and on the way to a full recovery."

"Yes, Mother," said the convalescing young man, "I'm feeling much better and stronger; even so, I hope that we can move into our house within the next couple of days so that I can finish my healing by trying to forget..."

"Forget what?" asked Calpurnia in surprise.

"Mother," replied the young man enigmatically, "health cannot return to the body while the spirit remains ill!"

"Son, you must open your heart to me more frankly and sincerely. Tell me your innermost sorrows; maybe I can give you some consolation!"

"No, Mother, I cannot!"

And then Agrippa Severus, whether due to his weakened state or the need to confess his feelings, broke into sobs, surprising his mother painfully with his unexpected behavior.

"What is it, my son? What is going on inside of you to make you suffer like this?" asked Calpurnia, extremely distressed, wrapping him in her loving arms. "Tell me everything!" she continued, anxiously. "Don't hide your sorrows from me, Agrippa, because I'm sure I can remedy the situation somehow!"

"Oh, Mother, dear mother!" he said in a long release of feelings. "I've been suffering ever since Plinius took the woman of my desires from me ... In my soul I feel a strange attraction to Flavia, and I cannot resign myself to the painful reality of this upcoming wedding.

"I believe that if Father were still alive, he would try to redeem my situation and win this marriage for me with his providential resolutions.

"Throughout all the adventures of my youth, I waited for the one I idealized in my dreams so that I could build a home and raise a family; but when the woman of my aspirations finally appears, she is snatched away from me, and by whom?!... Truth is, if Plinius were not my brother, I wouldn't hesitate to use the most violent means to get what I wanted!"

Calpurnia listened to him in silence, sharing his anguish and tears. She had been unaware of the silent duel of his sentiments, and only now could she understand the unnamed disease that was overwhelmingly consuming her older son.

However, she also had had a great deal of experience in life and the customs of the times in order to judge the situation accurately. Molding her feminine sensitivity and maternal fears into unbending fortitude, she caressed his hair gently and said:

"My dear Agrippa, I understand your heart and can appreciate the intensity of your mental suffering, but you need to understand that there are painful inevitabilities in life, whose distressing difficulties we must face with the utmost courage and patience ... It was for no other reason that the gods placed us at the top of the social ladder than for us to teach the ignorant and weak the traditions of our spiritual superiority when facing the painful challenges of life and destiny.

"This unjustifiable passion is killing you because I feel that Flavia and your brother were born into this world with their destinies intertwined ... Plinius was still a babe in arms when your father planned this marriage.

"Be strong," continued the noble matron, wiping her silent, sad tears, "because sometimes life demands from us these gestures of unlimited self-denial!

"Even so, we must lift our supplications to the gods! From Jupiter must come the comfort needed for your wounded soul."

After hearing his mother out, Agrippa felt somewhat relieved, as if his heart had grown calm after a storm of the most conflicting sentiments.

He perceived that his mother's thoughts constituted the truth, and even though the painful mental effect still tormented him, he was inwardly prepared to resign himself forever to the painful and irremediable situation.

Calpurnia let a few minutes pass before speaking again, as if she were waiting for the salutary effect of her first considerations:

"Would you be interested in taking a trip to our property in Avenium? I know full well that because of the strength of your calling and because of the demands of circumstances, your place is here as your father's successor; but such a trip could be a solution to a number of pressing problems, including your personal situation."

Agrippa listened to the suggestion with great interest, finally replying:

"Mother, your loving words have comforted me and I accept your suggestion to see if I can find the wonderful elixir of forgetfulness; even so, I would like to leave with State privileges because that way I would be able to spend some time in Massilia and stay there with the authority I need in such circumstances."

"Couldn't you do that easily enough?"

"I don't think so. I could arrange such a journey with official privileges only militarily."

"So why don't we use our prestigious friendships to get what you want? You know that, with the help of Publius and Senator Cornelius Docus, Plinius is expecting his promotion in a few days, with ample perspectives for progress and future accomplishments in the ranks of our armed forces. They even

say that Emperor Claudius is consolidating the centralization of powers with the new administration and seems eager to transform political privileges into military ones.

"It would give me only pride and satisfaction to offer my two sons to the Empire for the consolidation of its sovereign conquests."

"That's what I shall do," replied Agrippa, his eyes already dry as if his mother's suggestions were a balmy remedy for his pain-filled concerns.

Bit by bit, the final ruby-red streaks of the afternoon swept across the horizon, giving way to a beautiful star-studded night.

Supported by his mother's arms, the young patrician withdrew to his rooms feeling more comforted and waiting for the opportunity to take the steps needed for his new plans.

After settling him in comfortably, Calpurnia returned to the terrace in order to rest from her intense mental fatigue. Entreating the mercy of the gods, she fixed her tear-filled eyes on the constellations in the sky.

It seemed as if her heart had stopped in her breast to accompany the parade of the most endearing, sweet remembrances; her mind, however, felt tortured by bitter and painful thoughts.

It had been more than six months since her husband's death and the noble matron now felt completely alienated from society and the world. She had performed mental wonders in facing her social situation with dignity; however, in her resigned old age she felt that the course of time isolates certain individuals on the banks of the infinite river of life. She also sensed a noticeable difference in the environment and hearts that surrounded her, as if part of the mechanism of the reasoning she needed to accomplish a precise assessment of things and events were missing. That part was her husband, whom death had snatched away; it was his thoughtful and loving words, so kind and so wise.

Since the first days of staying at her friends' house, she had heard separately from Livia and Publius the most painful confidences about the events in Palestine that had compromised their marital happiness and tranquility forever. Even though she had mobilized all her faculties of observation and analysis, she could not seem to come to a definite decision about the events that would favor her good and loyal friend. While in her opinion Publius Lentulus was the same man, integrated in his most noble duties to the State and the dearest traditions of the patrician family, Livia, on the other hand, seemed excessively changed in her ways of feeling and believing.

In her concept of racial pride and vanity, she could not accept the principles of that humility, that fraternity and that lively faith to which Livia, within the postulates of the new doctrine that was invading all the sectors of society, gave full testimony with her own slaves.

How much she desired for her husband to still be at her side so that she could submit these intimate matters to him and be able to adopt his opinion, always full of careful consideration and wisdom ... But now she was alone and had to reason and act with full freedom of conscience; and no matter how much she searched her heart for a solution to her friends' painful marital problems, she could say nothing because of her observance and study of the family traditions cultivated by her soul with the utmost pride and care.

Myriad constellations were twinkling in the night sky, accentuating the mystery of her sorrowful digressions, when she heard the sound of approaching steps.

It was Publius, who, after finishing his meal, was coming to the terrace to rest his thoughts.

"You come here too?" the matron asked kindly.

"Yes, my friend, it pleases me to return in spirit to days gone by ... Sometimes I like to rest on this terrace so I can gaze up at the sky. For me, it is from there, from that immense, starry canopy, that we receive light and life: our unforgettable Flaminius must be there, comforted by the affection of the benevolent gods!

"In fact, noble Calpurnia," continued the senator thoughtfully, "this was one of our favorite places for our conversations and digressions when my forever-remembered friend used to give me the honor of his visits. It was also here that we often shared ideas and impressions about my departure for Judea in the days before my prolonged absence from Rome more than sixteen years ago!"

A long pause ensued, and it seemed that the two were taking advantage of the soft clearness of the night under the exact same spiritual vibration to descend deeply into the heart and to bring up the dearest memories in resigned and sorrowful silence.

After a few minutes, as if she wanted to change the course of her memories, the venerable matron said:

"Speaking of your past journey, I need to tell you that Agrippa will be leaving for Avenium as soon as he recovers."

"How come?" asked Publius, with great interest.

"For many days I've been reflecting on our need to check on our numerous properties, especially since, before he died, it was my husband's intention to do so personally."

"But is it really that pressing? What about Plinius's wedding? Won't Agrippa be there?"

"I don't think so; however, in his absence he will be represented by Saul, a freed, former slave of our house who has already sent a messenger from Massilia to confirm that he will be at the ceremony."

"That's too bad!" the senator said sadly.

"I should also tell you," continued the woman serenely, "that I'm hoping for an influential favor from your friendship with Cornelius Docus so that you can obtain a good situation from Emperor Claudius for our traveler. He would like to leave with official privileges, which means that the political rights belonging to him from his birth must be transformed into special military privileges.

"That won't be hard to do. The current administration is much more interested in acknowledging the value of the armed forces."

A new silence settled onto the conversation, and after a long pause the senator said once more, as if wishing to make the most of the opportunity for a decisive solution to his bitter problem:

"Calpurnia," he said anxiously, "when you broached the subject of my travel in the past, you told me Agrippa had to make a trip in the present. And I still remember my lost happiness that has never returned!"

The senator searched every psychological reaction by his venerable friend, eager to find in her a gesture of great comfort. He wanted her, as the confidant of Livia, to whom she was almost like a mother through the eternal and sacrosanct ties of the spirit, to dissipate all his doubts, to speak of his wife's innocence, and to give him the certainty that his capricious and egotistical male heart was wrong. But he waited in vain for this spontaneous defense, which failed to appear at this necessary and decisive moment. Flaminius's respectable widow left the painful issue up in the air, stating in a sad voice as a ray of moonlight crowned her white hair:

"Yes, my friend, the gods can give us happiness and they can take it away ... We are two souls weeping over the shattering of our heart's most precious dreams!"

Those discouraging words struck the sensitive and proud senator like a sharp saber slowly cutting him in two.

"But after all, my good friend," he said, almost sternly, as if expecting a decisive answer for his soul's anguished uncertainty, "what do you think about Livia now?"

"Publius," Calpurnia calmly replied, "I don't know if sincerity is wrong under certain circumstances, but I prefer to be sincere even so.

"Ever since the painful confidences you shared with me about the events in Palestine, I've been observing my friend so that I could plead her innocence. Unfortunately, I have seen the most striking and unexpected changes of a spiritual nature. She is humble, gentle, intelligent and benevolent, as always, but she seems to disdain all our family traditions and our dearest beliefs.

"In our intimate conversations, she no longer reveals her old charming shyness. On the contrary, she has strong opinions about social problems, which she thinks she has tackled through her contact with a new faith. Her concepts of unjustifiable equality shock me; she doesn't hesitate to regard our gods as harmful illusions of society, for which she reserves her harshest recriminations, revealing singular modifications in her thinking. She has gone so far as to fraternize with the slaves of her own home as if she were a simple commoner...

"Mightn't it be a kind of mental disturbance after some downfall to which her individual dignity strongly reacted? Mightn't it perhaps be influences from the environment or even from the company of the slaves during her prolonged absence from Rome? I don't know ... The truth is that I still cannot in good conscience comment on your marital woes, and I would advise you to let time go by and see what happens."

After a brief pause, the elderly matron finished her remarks, asking with interest:

"Why did you let Livia get exposed to these new ideas, leaving her at the mercy of that Jewish reformer known as Jesus of Nazareth?"

"Good question," murmured Publius, extremely disheartened, "but my motive was based on compelling circumstances because Livia believed that the Nazarene prophet actually healed our daughter!"

"You were naïve. You shouldn't have accepted this possibility in view of the advancement of our knowledge. You could have saved your wife's impressionable soul from such dangerous spiritual influences. It has been shown that this new creed recommends humiliating ideas and subverts the innermost dispositions of the individuals who accept it. Wealthy and learned people who submit to these hateful principles within the Empire, favoring an imaginary kingdom, seem delirious from a terrible narcotic that makes them forget and disdain fortune, name, traditions and even the family itself!

"I will work with you to keep Flavia away from such moral harm by taking her with me as soon as our dear children are married, because the truth is that, as far as Livia is concerned, I have done everything I could to convince her, but to no avail."

"Even so, my good friend," said the senator emotionally as if defending himself in front of the noble patrician woman, "I've noticed that Livia continues to be a simple and modest woman, who demands nothing from me that verges on the exorbitant or superfluous. During these nearly seventeen years of separation in our home, the only thing she has asked of me was permission to continue her Christian practices with a long-time servant, a permission I felt obliged to grant, considering the continuation of her silent and sad renunciation within the family.

"I also believe that it was very little to ask, especially now that, according to the custom, all the women in the city

demand from their husbands the most luxurious extravagances of the Orient; however, I would advise you – since you keep our dearest traditions intact – to wait a bit longer before you forget the painful events of the past. That will give us time to see if Livia will benefit from the way we treat her and finally return to the bosom of our traditions and beliefs!"

A sorrowful silence set in between them after these words.

Calpurnia felt that she had fulfilled her duty, and that night Publius felt more disheartened than ever.

In a few days, Agrippa got what he wanted and left for Avenium, in spite of his brother and Flavia begging him to wait until after the wedding. His resolution was unwavering. Flaminius's elder son, weakened under the weight of his disillusionment, would be away from Rome for several long and sorrowful years.

The days passed by swiftly, and since we are obliged to walk through our story in the company of all its characters, we must state that, in finding herself completely rejected by the man of her choice, Aurelia, reeling with poisonous spite, had decided to accept the unselfish and loving Emilianus Lucius's proposal.

Intoxicated by her lower sentiments, Fulvia had been following the silent struggle and decided to bide her time before carrying out her sinister retaliation.

Soon thereafter, Plinius and Flavia got married in discreet luxury at the Aventine villa. The groom, full of military honors and honorable titles, as well as his future wife of indescribable beauty and adorable simplicity, felt blessed, as if perfect happiness consisted only of the eternal merging of their hearts and souls. That day undoubtedly marked the most sacred and beautiful moment of their lives.

In the small group of guests, composed of their closest relationships, was a man who was still quite young, a

conspicuous figure in that ambient characterized essentially in accordance with the times.

His impetuous and burning eyes had rested on the bride with mysterious and strange interest.

That man was Saul of Gioras. Having abandoned his paternal surname, he undertook a new Roman designation, according to a former authorization by Flaminius in order to facilitate the social standing of his wealth.

In vain, the senator tried to identify this Jew, who seemed to be a former personal acquaintance. Saul, however, had succeeded in recognizing his former tormentor; he recognized him and remained silent, calming the strong emotions he felt within, because, like his father, his heart was immersed in the dark plans of a cruel revenge.

III
Plans of Darkness

Contrary to what one might expect, the Jewish freedman did not return to Massilia after Plinius's wedding, alleging that business interests were keeping him in the capital of the Empire.

By staying at the Severus mansion, where the young couple had moved in to be with Calpurnia, Saul had many opportunities to get to know Senator Publius Lentulus. The two men had several conversations about Judea and its important regions.

The senator was intrigued by Saul's intense gaze and facial features – which seemed somewhat familiar – and he had a perfect recollection of the anguished and afflicted father who had come to him in Jerusalem. Now, let us follow the senator in one of his conversations with this interesting stranger as he approached him with this unexpected question:

"Saul, you've said that you're a son of the environs of Jerusalem. Was your father perchance one Andre of Gioras?"

The freedman bit his lip at that direct question, which touched on the most delicate matter of his existence. He replied deceivingly:

"No, Senator. That is not my father's name. I was enslaved by merciless and cruel hands simply because I was nothing but an uneducated and irresponsible child," he emphasized with profound irony. "My father was a poor farmer who had nothing but his arms for his daily work ... However, I had the good fortune of coming into the benevolent hands of Flaminius Severus, who guided me to freedom and fortune. Now, with the little I have been able to provide him, my father's work opportunities have increased and he enjoys not only a certain social prominence in Jerusalem but also a high position in the temple.

"Why do you ask?"

The senator frowned at such a brazen response, but feeling relieved that this did not, in fact, seem to be the Saul of his painful memories, he responded with his conscience more at ease:

"Because I briefly knew a Jewish farmer named Andre of Gioras, whose facial features were a lot like yours."

And the conversation proceeded with the normal rhythm of irrelevancy that characterizes the conventionalism of social life.

Saul had a strange gleam in his eye, however, and seemed extremely pleased with the way things were going, just waiting for an opportunity to carry out his dark plans of revenge.

A secret, unspeakable motive was keeping him in Rome, even though numerous business matters needed him to be in Massilia, where his name was associated with major interests of a financial and material nature. That motive was the intense desire to be noticed by Plinius's young wife, whose eyes seemed to be luring him toward an abyss of impassioned and irrepressible love.

From the moment he saw her in her bridal adornments on the happy day of her marriage, he thought he had found the ideal woman of his deepest and wildest dreams.

The reality was that the children of his former masters deserved his respect and greatest deference; however, a force stronger than all his sentiments of gratitude caused him to want to possess Flavia Lentulia at any price – even if it cost him his life.

Her beautiful and pensive eyes, her loving and spontaneous gracefulness, her lucid and refined intelligence, all her physical and spiritual attributes, which he had keenly observed in the few days he had been in the city, led him to believe that this woman personified his idealizations.

He was engulfed in this whirlwind of dark thoughts for nearly two months of unspeakable and anguishing expectation. He never missed the slightest opportunity to show Flavia the degree of his affection, admiration and esteem under Plinius's friendly and trusting eyes.

In the solitude of his inner preoccupations, Saul reasoned that if she would love him, if she would return the unrestrained affection of his impetuous and egotistical soul, he wouldn't have to carry out his plan of revenge against her father. In fact, he would bring back young Marcus Lentulus to his family and wipe out the past of dark visions. But if the opposite occurred, he would carry out his diabolical plans and get drunk on the hateful wine of death.

By this time it was the year 47, and not forgetting Fulvia and her daughter, we find them once more under the control of the same cruel and dark sentiments.

In vain Aurelia had married Emilianus Lucius, for he did not at all represent the type of man that her emotions thought she had found in Flaminius's younger son.

After the first disenchantments and dissentions of her married life, at her mother's advice and in her company, she

finally turned to the strange concoctions of Araxes, the famous Egyptian sorcerer, who had a shop full of exotic merchandise in the vicinity of Esquilinus.

Araxes, whose nefarious trade everyone knew as an inexhaustible source of miracle potions for love, illness and death, was an initiate from ancient Egypt. He had strayed from his sacrosanct mission of charity and peace due to his burning passion for the money of his numerous Roman customers, who, at the time, were involved in a plethora of blatant vices and the dissolution of the beautiful customs of the sacred institution of the family.

Exploiting their lower passions and corrupt habits, the Egyptian mage used almost all of his spiritual knowledge to cast all sorts of evil spells and to instigate all sorts of crimes, causing tremendous damage with his poisonous drugs and strange counsels.

He was discreetly contacted by Fulvia and her daughter. Right there, among large vessels and bundles of plants and various substances, they told him the reason for their visit. He buried his head in his hands, as if his spirit were penetrating the tiniest secrets of the invisible world as he sat in front of a tripod and other tools of the occult sciences, with which he, an apt psychologist, impressed the suggestible minds of the many clients who asked him to solve their problems.

After several minutes of concentration with strangely gleaming eyes, the Egyptian mage addressed Aurelia, stating in imposing words:

"Madam, I see dolorous images of your spiritual life in the distant past! ... I see Delphi in the glorious days of its oracle, and I see you wanting to seduce a man who does not belong to you ... This is the same man of today ... The same souls now roam in other bodies, and you must think about the

reality of the present and conform yourself to the well-defined separation of the lines of destiny!"

Both surprised and dismayed, Aurelia listened as her mother's shrewd mind, moved by an indefinable impression, followed the conversation.

"What are you saying?" asked the young woman at the peak of her wounded sensibility. "Other lives? A man who did not belong to me? ... What are you talking about?"

"Yes," replied the sorcerer with imperturbable serenity, "our spirits go through many lifetimes that enrich our souls with great knowledge about the duties that fall to us in life!

"You lived in Athens and Delphi during an important phase of profound carelessness in the matters of love. Sensing today that you are close to the object of your ardent and sinful passions of the past, you think you may be able to satisfy your unrestrained and shameful desires!

"Many, many people have come here. I have counseled many in their plans, which are often unjustifiable and vile; but in your case, there is a voice speaking even louder to my conscience. Up to this point this man has been conscientious in his behavior, but if in your thoughtlessness you go so far as to tempt him, it is possible that his heart – which is also uneasy – may respond to your whims. Even so, try not to give in to this temptation, because fate has reunited him with his twin soul. A harsh path of bitter trials awaits them in the future in order to solidify their mutual trust, affection and spiritual strength! Do not get in the way of this woman, whom you believe to be your powerful rival! ... To come between her and her husband would be to increase your own punishment, because, in reality, you are not prepared for any sanctifying acts of self-denial. What you imagine to be deep and sublime love is nothing more than a harmful whim of your willful heart,

which is not ready to make any sacrifices for the affection of a loving and loyal companion, but is ready to multiply your lovers by the number of your artificial desires."

Aurelia was livid at hearing these words. She considered them impertinent and insulting. She wanted to defend herself, but a powerful force seemed to close her throat, annulling the efforts of her vocal cords.

Fulvia, however, was overcome with resentment at the man's insulting words and came to her daughter's defense, reprehending him vehemently:

"Araxes, you impudent sorcerer, what do you mean to do with such words? Insult us? We can make the justice of the Empire fall upon your head and have you thrown into prison, revealing your sinister secrets to everyone!"

"And might you not have a few secrets of your own, noble lady?" he replied, unperturbed. "Are you perchance so guiltless that you would not hesitate to condemn me?"

Fulvia bit her lips, trembling with hatred and snapping furiously:

"Shut up, you bastard! Don't you know I'm the wife of a praetor?"

"It doesn't look like it," said the sorcerer with serene irony. "Matrons of nobility wouldn't come here asking me to cooperate in a crime ... And furthermore, what would they say in Rome of a patrician woman who lowered herself to the point of privately seeking out an old sorcerer on Esquilinus?

"It's true that I've committed much evil in my life. But everyone knows that, and I don't try to hide behind social conventions to cover the heinousness of my miserable existence! ... Even so, I wish to save your young daughter from the dismal path of your wickedness, because if she were to follow your serpent coils on the path of a criminal and unfaithful wife, her only end

will be prostitution and misfortune, with the finishing touch of an ignominious death at the point of a sword."

Fulvia wanted to strike back at Araxes' insults and rebuff his offensive words, which she perceived as the ultimate in insolence. But fearing further complications and grasping her mother's guilt, Aurelia took her by the arm and they both left in silence under the contemptuous look of the old Egyptian as he returned to piling bundles of herbs among the numerous pots of strange substances.

However, he had little time to spend on his lonely and silent task. Two hours later, another person knocked on his door.

Araxes was surprised at the sight of the ingratiating Jew who had come looking for him. The glow in his eyes, the distinctive face, the harmony of its Jewish characteristics made the young man a singular and suggestive figure.

It was Saul. He was turning to the same mysterious processes in his burning desire to possess Plinius's wife at any price, seeking some miraculous talisman or potion from the sorcerer to serve his outlandish purposes.

Received in the same manner as the other two personages in our sorrowful drama, Saul told the fortuneteller about his torment regarding that honest and dignified woman.

After his usual concentration (with which we are already familiar) next to the three-legged tripod where he said his customary prayers, Araxes cracked a slight and discreet smile, like someone who had found yet another strange coincidence in his vast studies of human psychology. His hesitation, however, lasted only a few moments, before he said in a measured and somber voice:

"Jew!" he said sternly. "Praise the God of your beliefs, because you were lifted from the dust by the hands of the man whom today you are meaning to betray ... The strict laws of your

homeland command that you not, even in thought, covet your neighbor's wife, much less the devoted and faithful companion of one of your greatest benefactors. Take a step back on your sad and ill-fated path! There was a time when your spirit lived in the body of a priest of Apollo in the glorious temple of Delphi ... You pursued a young woman of the sacred practice and led her to misery and death with your nefarious and outrageous derangements. Do not dare now to snatch her from the arms intended for her support and protection in this world! ... Do not meddle in the destiny of two people whom the powers of heaven have shaped for each other!"

Despite being impressed with that incisive statement, the young Jewish man did not react like the two women who preceded him in his mysterious visit.

Pulling out a bag of coins, he caressed them in his hands as if to incite the fortuneteller's greed, and said in an almost pleading voice:

"Araxes, I have gold ... lots of gold, and I will give you whatever you want for the help of your knowledge ... For the sake of your gods, win this woman's love for me and I shall reward you generously for your invaluable efforts."

The Egyptian mage's eyes flashed in the glow of a strange sentiment; contemplating the cornucopia-shaped bag of gleaming gold, as if desiring it intensely, he murmured more gently:

"My friend, this woman is not coveted only by you, and I think it would be best if you did what you could to keep her from leaving her husband!"

"You mean there's another man?"

"Yes, the signs of destiny have shown me that she is also desired by her husband's brother."

Saul made a gesture of annoyance, feeling bitterly tormented by the cruelest jealousy and murmuring between his teeth:

"Ah! Yes ... now I understand Agrippa's hasty trip to Avenium!"

Raising his voice like someone playing the last card of his aspiration, he said anxiously:

"Araxes, I ask you once more! ... Do everything you can! ... I shall pay you royally!"

The mage bent his head again in an attitude of deep meditation, as if his soul were seeking some dark force in the invisible world favorable to his sinister designs.

After a few moments, he said in a benevolent and friendly tone:

"It seems that there will be an opportunity for your affection some time from now!"

The young Jew listened to him in anguished expectation as he continued:

"The omens of fate say that, to consolidate their deep love, their mutual trust and spiritual progress, the two spouses are destined to undergo painful trials in a few years! Something will happen to separate them in their own home, but I cannot say exactly what it is. I only know that a long period of asceticism and self-denial will come to pass for both of them in the sacred institution of the family ... When that happens, who knows? My friend could try for this love he so ardently covets!"

"Then, something will happen?" asked Saul, curious and afflicted in his thorough investigations of this transcendent matter, "but what will happen to separate them in their domestic environment?"

"I do not know ..."

"And each of them will be forced into a faithful asceticism and an unbreakable dedication?"

"The determinism of fate commands it to be so, but either the husband or his wife may interfere in these trials, thereby

incurring a new moral debt or redeeming the painful past through the moral value of suffering, by using his or her good or ill will in the determinism of these purifying trials ... Be aware, however, that human tendencies lean more strongly toward evil, making it possible for your plans to be fulfilled at that time."

"How long do I have to wait?" asked the freedman, deeply concerned.

"A few years."

"And it would be useless to make any effort before then?"

"Completely. I know you have numerous interests in a distant city. In the meantime you should take care of your material affairs."

Saul stared at length at that man who seemed to know the hidden-most secrets of his life, passing his remarks through the sieve of his conscience.

He gave Araxes the purse full of money, thanked him for his attention and promised to return at the opportune time.

A few days later, on the eve of his departure, the young Jew made the most of a few minutes of pure and simple time together with the young Flavia:

"Noble lady," he began in an almost timid voice, but with that same strange light of his lower sentiments radiating in his eyes, "I do not know the reason for the sentiment I am about to reveal to you, but the truth is that I am leaving for Massilia with your image imprinted in my deepest thoughts!"

"Sir," said Flavia Lentulia, blushing and troubled, "I must dwell only in the thoughts of the one with whom the gods have illuminated my destiny!"

"Noble Flavia," replied the astute Jew, realizing his attempt was premature and untimely, "my admiration has nothing to do with any unworthy sentiments. For me, you are doubly respectable, not only because of your lofty position as a

patrician, but also because you are the companion of one of the greatest benefactors of my life.

"Do not let my words trouble you, because my heart holds only the most loyal interest for your personal happiness with the worthy husband you have chosen.

"I feel for you what any slave must feel for a benefactor in his life, since in my wretched situation as a freedman, I cannot present myself to your generosity with the credentials of a brother who venerates and esteems you so very much."

"Very well, Saul," said the young woman, relieved, "my husband sees you as a very dear brother and I am honored to share his sentiments."

"Thank you very much," said Saul, falsely. "And now that you understand my fraternal thoughts so well, it is with the interest of a brother that I address your benevolent soul to warn you of a danger."

"A danger?" asked Flavia, troubled.

"Yes. I am speaking to you in confidence and I would ask you to keep what I'm about to tell you absolutely secret."

And as the young woman listened with full attention, Saul continued with his perfidious insinuations.

"Did you know that Plinius was almost engaged to your Uncle Salvius Lentulus's daughter, who is now married to Emilianus Lucius?"

"Yes," replied the poor woman, her soul burdened.

"Well, I must advise you as a brother that in spite of her strict matrimonial commitments, your cousin Aurelia has not renounced the man of her former preference. I found out today through a friend that she has sought out various sorcerers in Rome for the purpose of recapturing her former love at any price!"

Hearing these perfidious words, Flavia experienced the first thorn in her married life, struck by the cruelest jealousy.

Plinius epitomized all her young woman's idealism and all her happiness. She had placed all her dreams, and all her best and blossoming hopes in him. Assaulted by the first unpleasantness of her social life in the great city of her parents, in that moment she felt the urge for a friendly clarification, a kind word that would restore the balance of her heart, now troubled by its first affliction. She was lacking something that could complete the noble qualities of her soul, something that should have been a mother's addition to her education. In his spiritual blindness, Publius Lentulus had molded her character in the pride of their race and in the vain traditions of their ancestors, but he had failed to develop her qualities of reflection and careful examination. Livia's influence, of course, would have built up these qualities in her daughter.

The young patrician felt her heart quaking with an almost fierce jealousy; but understanding her duties in such situations, she recovered enough moral strength to react to that first onset of trials, replying to the young Jewish man and doing everything possible to feign the utmost grave and calm nobility:

"I am grateful for your interest; however, nothing warrants me to be suspicious about my husband's upright conduct, especially since Plinius sums up all my ideals as a woman and wife!"

"Ma'am," replied the Jew, biting his lip, "the feminine soul has a fertile imagination that is out of touch with practical life. It can often be deceived by appearances.

"I rejoice at what you have told me and I praise your unlimited trust; even so, you can rest assured that you will find me at any time to be a sincere protector of your happiness and virtue!"

Having said this, Saul of Gioras politely excused himself, leaving the poor girl with her surprise and grief.

The first adversities had touched Flavia Lentulia's married life, and she had no idea as to how to ward off the danger threatening her ongoing happiness.

That night at home, Plinius Severus did not find the sweet and adorable creature of his devotion and deepest love. In the intimacy of their bedroom, he found his wife filled with foolish and annoying recriminations, touched by bitter and incomprehensible sadness. This was the first incidence of the frictions that in the course of a life can ruin a couple's happiness forever if their hearts are not sufficiently prepared for spiritual understanding in their redeeming trials, despite the divine route of their twin souls being a glorious path to the highest of destinies.

In a few days Saul had returned to Massilia, expecting to settle some material undertakings so that he could return to Rome as soon as possible.

The lives of our characters in the Empire's capital continued nearly the same as ever.

Senator Lentulus remained engulfed in his cogitations of a political nature, but went to his daughter's home whenever possible, where he talked at length with Calpurnia about the past and the needs of the present.

As for Livia, compulsorily kept from her daughter by the force of circumstances, distanced from her former best friend because of Calpurnia's incomprehension, and still incommunicado with her husband in her own house, she had taken refuge in fervent and sincere prayer and in Ana's dedicated friendship.

Every day, in sorrow-filled solitude, they both prayed before the crude cross that Simeon had given them in his final moments.

Oftentimes, in ecstasy, they both saw the small cross touched with a highly tenuous light, while at the same time they had the impression of hearing singular and wonderful exhortations from afar in the sanctuary of their hearts and minds.

It seemed like the gentle, friendly voice of the Samaritan apostle had come back from Jesus' kingdom to teach them faith, fulfillment of the duty of fraternal charity, resignation and compassion. Then they both would weep as if the harmonies of a divine prelude of celestial life were vibrating in their sensitive and loving souls.

At that time, informed by some humble Christians, Ana told her mistress about the meetings in the catacombs. Only there could the followers of nascent Christianity gather, since from the moment it appeared in Roman society, its ideas were considered subversive and perverting.

The Empire founded by Augustus – which, after the Republic's democratic gains, signified the greatest example of a powerful state in all epochs – did not tolerate any partisan gatherings as far as social and political doctrines were concerned.

The same thing was happening in Rome as is happening in today's modern nations, which oscillate between the most varied forms of government along the axis of extremism and the ignorance of the people, who persist in not understanding that the reform of institutions must start with the individual.

The only gatherings allowed were the funeral cooperatives because of their programs of mercy and protection for those who could no longer disturb the temporal powers of Caesar.

Persecuted by the laws that did not tolerate innovative ideas, and faced with aversion by the powerful forces of ancient traditions, the followers of Jesus were fully aware of their future of anguish and suffering. Some of the stricter decrees compelled them to hide the manifestations of their beliefs, although the government of Claudius always sought to maintain the highest order and harmony without great excesses in the execution of its dictates.

In keeping with the times, some of the more enlightened believers of the faith advocated their stance publicly in letters; but

long before the sinister crimes of Domitius Nero, the atmosphere of the primitive Christians was already one of affliction, anguish and strenuous work. Thus, meetings were held periodically in the catacombs, notwithstanding their absolutely secret nature.

A large number of apostles from Palestine passed through Rome, bringing the most edifying and consoling sermons to the brothers and sisters of the metropolis.

There, in the silence of the large blocks of stone, in caverns forgotten by time, enlightened and moralizing voices could be heard explaining the Gospel of the Lord or exalting the sublimity of his kingdom above all the precarious powers of human perversity. Bright torches illuminated these underground hideouts concealed by ivy, while their stone-covered doors gave the impression of anguish, sadness and utter abandonment.

Whenever a more devoted pilgrim arrived in the city, a widespread announcement went out to all the converts.

The sign of the cross in any form was the silent password among the brethren of the belief, and made in special ways, it served as a notice whose meaning was immediately understood.

By means of such continued communications, Ana was advised of all the activities in the catacombs and kept her mistress informed about all the events occurring in Rome regarding the redemptive doctrine of the Crucified One.

And so it was that when the arrival of an apostle from Galilee or its border regions was announced, Livia made it a point to attend. She would go with her devoted and faithful servant, crossing the roads on foot, although with her husband's authorization, she now wore her patrician clothing as she freely professed her beliefs. She was aware that to society her attitude represented a grave danger, but Simeon's sacrifice was a landmark of light pointing out her destiny on earth. She had acquired courage, serenity, resignation and self-knowledge

so that she would never waver in detriment to her ardent and pure faith. If her former friends in Rome attributed her inner changes to madness, if her husband did not understand her, and if Calpurnia and Plinius were digging a greater abyss than the one Publius had opened between her and her daughter, her spirit had found in her belief a divine pathway to flee from all earthly sorrows. The Divine Master of Nazareth softened the wounds in her soul, taking pity on her anguish-torn heart. Her faith was like a bright torch lighting her pain-filled road, and from which radiated all the light of human trust in the divine providence, a trust that transforms the painful trials of earth into a foretaste of the eternal joys of the Infinite.

IV
Tragedies and Hopes

Real life is always prosaic, without fantasies or dreams.

And this is how the lives of the characters in this book are running their course on the living screen of the stark and painful realities of life on earth.

Those who attain certain social positions, as well as those who approach the twilight of their fragmentary life, have little to tell regarding their daily routine.

There is a time in the lives of individuals in which it seems that the soul's psychic drive is no longer available to renew their dreams and early aspirations; it is as if their spiritual condition has become crystallized or stationary. Deep down there is no more room for new illusions or the revival of old hopes. Bound by the chains of routine, of the uniform and unchanging weeks, the soul, as if in a painful period of expectation and forced silence, stops on the path to observe those who pass by.

We are now in the year 57, and the lives of the actors in this sorrowful drama have barely changed in the ongoing development of their shared and anguishing events.

There had been only one major change at Calpurnia's residence.

In his glowing displays of physical vitality, Plinius Severus had received outstanding distinctions in the military organizations that ensured the stability of the Empire. Periodic long stays in Gaul and Spain had won him the most honorable decorations, but had also increased his vanity and pride, despite the kindness of his heart.

His wife's first displays of jealousy had led to damaging and painful consequences.

Treacherous confidences by lying female friends had been added to Saul's criminal plans, and instead of enjoying the marital happiness that should have derived from her heart's noble virtues, Flavia Lentulia had fallen, without realizing it, into the dark abyss of suffering and trials caused by her unrestrained jealousy.

For a man in Plinius's position, it was easy to replace his home environment with the rowdy festivities of the circus and the company of easy women, which were not lacking in any part of that city of sin.

Soon his wife's affection was replaced by the false love of numerous lovers.

Calpurnia tried in vain to interpose her kindly help and loving counsel, and in vain the Roman official's young wife continued in her silent and composed suffering.

Flavia's rare complaints were kept in the benevolent heart of her husband's mother, or were confided to her father in anguished and painful confidences.

Publius Lentulus understood the importance of a woman's cooperation in the ongoing renewal of the customs

and construction of home and family; hence, he encouraged his daughter to show the utmost resignation and tolerance. He led her to understand that a man's wife is the honor of his name and the honor of his name is the nourishment of her life, and that if a husband is perverting himself in the whirlpool of unbridled passions, scorning all the good things in life, sometimes all it takes is his wife's tears for conjugal peace to shine again in the cloudless sky of pure and mutual love.

In Flavia's mind her father's words had the ring of undeniable truth, and she sought to lean on his invaluable promises and counsel as she hoped that, among the blessings along the way, her husband would return to her love some day.

Meanwhile, Plinius Severus wasted a veritable fortune on gambling and feasts. His extravagance with women became proverbial in the most refined centers of the city, and he rarely sought out his family environment, where everyone's affections were working together to gently enlighten his spirit that had strayed from the upright path.

The death of old praetor Salvius Lentulus before the year 50 had obligated Publius's family and Flaminius's survivors to observe social formalities involving Fulvia and her daughter when they paid tribute to the ashes of the deceased, who, enveloped in the mystery of his resigned and inexplicable passivity, had passed through the world.

This was enough for Aurelia to pursue her lost opportunity again. A look, an encounter, a word, and Flaminius's younger son, enamored with forbidden attractions, reestablished the affectionate bond that his sanctified and pure love for Flavia had shattered.

Soon both were raising eyebrows at theaters, circuses or grand sports gatherings of the time.

From all these sorrows, Flavia Lentulia had created a Calvary of silent agony within the home that her faithfulness

had dignified. In her silent ponderings she often deplored her former outbursts of unjustifiable jealousy, which had given rise to the first pretext for her husband to stray from his sacred family duties. But in her patrician pride, she deemed it too late to repent and she believed in her heart that the only recourse was to wait with the utmost humility and patience for her husband's return to her faithful and dedicated heart. In her moments of sadness, she would write anguished and enlightened pages, sometimes imploring the mercy of the gods in fervent supplication, and sometimes defining her inner anguish in moving verses, read only by the eyes of her father, who, weeping with emotion, often wondered if his poor daughter's marital unhappiness were not a singular and dolorous inheritance for her too.

Around the year 53 one of the principal figures in our story disappeared in the dark arms of death under tragic circumstances.

We are referring to Fulvia, who, two years after her husband's passing, had begun to display serious mental disturbances along with unsettling organic conditions resulting from her past follies.

Cancerous sores devoured her vital centers, and for two years her emaciated body was forced to lie in the most painful and uncomfortable positions, while her restless, staring eyes danced in their sockets, as if, in her hallucinations, she were being compelled to see the most sinister and darkest visions.

On these occasions, she did not have the support of the daughter she had failed to educate – Aurelia was involved in constant parties, encounters and numerous social programs.

But divine mercy never forsakes even the most hapless beings, and had given her a loving and compassionate son-in-law to be with her in her expiatory pain.

Emilianus Lucius, Aurelia's husband, was one of those worthy and brave men, rare in patience and the noblest family virtues.

Night after night, he kept watch with the unfortunate old woman, whose physical pain punished her mercilessly with the whip of excruciating suffering.

In her final days, we can hear her disconnected and pain-filled words. Late at night, when even the slaves were resting from their fatigue, it seemed that her madwoman's ears had become frightfully more acute in order to hear voices from the invisible realm, hurling insults at their former victims as they returned from the lowest spirit zones to surround her bed of suffering and death. With her eyes inordinately wide open, as if they were fixed on ominous and horrible visions, the poor old woman would cling to her son-in-law at the peak of her crisis of fear and unconscious desperation and would shout in terror:

"Emilianus! The room is filled with dark beings! ... Can't you see them? Listen carefully ... Listen to their harsh insults and sinister laughter! ... Did you know Sulpicius Tarquinius, Pilate's lictor? ... Here he comes with his legionnaires masked in darkness! ... They talk about death! ... They talk to me about death! ... Help me, my son! ... Sulpicius Tarquinius has a terrifying dragon's body!"

Bouts of sobbing and tears followed these anguished remarks.

"Calm down, Mother!" said the military man, moved to tears. "Let's trust in the infinite goodness of the gods!"

"Ah! ... The gods!" screamed the wretched woman in hysterical laughter. "The gods ... where are the gods in this vile house? Emilianus, we ourselves have created the gods to justify the follies of our lives! Jupiter's Olympus is a lie necessary for the State ... We are nothing but a skull decorated with a fistful of dust! ... The only place that must truly exist is hell, where demons dwell with their pitchforks in the live coals! ... Here they come in dark ranks!"

And clinging fiercely to the official's chest, she screamed nonsensically, as if trying to hide her face from the threatening shades:

"You'll never take me, damn you! ... Get back, you scum! ... I have a son who will defend me from your dark onslaught!"

Emilianus Lucius kindly stroked the unfortunate woman's white hair, encouraging her to implore the mercy of the gods in order to alleviate her dreadful suffering.

At other times, as if her conscience had been awakened by a divine ray, Fulvia Procula would say more calmly to the son that destiny had given her:

"Emilianus, I'm approaching death and I feel the need to confess my wrongs and great errors to you! Forgive me, son, if I have given you so much work! My miserable existence has been a long series of crimes, whose horrible stains cannot be washed away by the tears of disease that are now leading me to the impenetrable secrets of the other life! I was never been able to ponder the terrible sorrows that await me. Now, in the heavy darkness of my soul, I feel that my conscience is blackened with the soot of the fire of the despicable passions that took over my pain-filled destiny! ... I was a disloyal wife, merciless, and an unfit mother...

"Who will have mercy on me if there is, in fact, spiritual light after the ashes of the tomb? From this bed of madness and desperate agony I see an unending parade of hideous ghosts that seem to be waiting for me at the portico of the tomb! ... They are pointing out my past crimes and are overjoyed with the suffering that is dragging me to the grave!

"Because I have no faith, I feel abandoned to these dragons of the Beyond as they force me to recall my criminal and dark past!"

A torrent of tears of remorse and repentance would follow these unsteady moments of reasoning and lucidity.

Emilianus Lucius would tenderly caress her wrinkled face, immersing himself in dolorous musings.

That heartrending condition was indeed the tempestuous end of a life of blatant transgressions.

Yes ... now he understood everything. His wife's rebelliousness, her incomprehension, their marriage problems, that insatiable thirst for noisy parties in the company of affections that were not his own – all must be the bitter fruit of a contaminated and defective upbringing. His heart, however, was filled with unlimited benevolence. A brave soul, he understood the situation, and those who understand always forgive.

One night, as the sick woman was experiencing a severe and prolonged crisis, the kind official ordered the servants to take their leave.

The poor madwoman was talking non-stop as if she had been affected by an inexhaustible and incomprehensible energy.

Copious sweat drenched her face due to a constant, high fever.

"Emilianus," she screamed desperately, "where's Aurelia? Why doesn't she want to watch at my bedside on the eve of my death? Just like all my false friends, do you suppose that she too is repulsed by my body?"

"Aurelia," the official kindly explained, "had to fulfill a commitment with her friends in the organization of some societal work!"

"Ah!" shouted the demented woman in sinister laughter. "Societal work ... Societal work! ... How could you believe that, my son? Undoubtedly, as we speak, your wife is at the side of her former lover, Plinius Severus, in some suspicious place in this miserable city!"

Emilianus Lucius did everything he could to keep the pitiful madwoman from continuing with her terrible revelations, but Fulvia went on with her dreadful accusations:

"No, don't try to stop me," she went on, desperately. "Hear me out! All my accusations are the criminal truth ... Oftentimes, it's those who have gone mad who know the truth! ... I myself was the one who led my unfortunate daughter to cheat ... Plinius Severus was the enemy she needed to conquer in her role as a woman ... I encouraged the adultery, consummated under this roof! ... You can see, my son, the enormity of my wrongs! ... Be horrified, but forgive me! ... And keep an eye on your wife so that she won't keep on betraying you with her shameful treachery and one day sadly rot like me in a bed of scented silk!"

The kind military man listened with mouth agape to those dark revelations.

So, in addition to not understanding his idealism, his wife had also been shamelessly betraying him, right there in the sanctity of their home? Grief-stricken emotions rose in his heart, but he still harbored the thought that perhaps these accusations were nothing more than the feverish delirium of an incurable dementia. A terrible and merciless doubt settled over his anguished heart. A few tears moistened his big, sorrowful eyes, while the sick woman took a respite from her painful revelations.

Within minutes, however, she continued stridently:

"And Aurelia? What has become of Aurelia that she doesn't come to see me? Where's my poor wicked and unfaithful daughter? Tomorrow, my son, I will confess to you the infamous secrets of our unfortunate existence."

However, someone had cautiously and silently entered the adjoining room. It was Aurelia, who had just returned from a noisy party, where wine and pleasures had flowed abundantly.

Even though she was in the room next door, she had still been able to hear her mother's final words at the height of her fever and sickly desperation. Aurelia had heard the sad revelations she had just disclosed to Emilianus, and she was sure that the

sick woman would fulfill her terrible promise the next day. In an instant, she studied all the possibilities of carrying out the dark idea that had just entered her criminal and wretched mind. Her eyes seemed glazed with rage, under the scourge of a morbid thought that suddenly blossomed in her cold and pitiless soul.

She took off her party clothes and readjusted herself to the home environment. She opened the door that led to her mother's bed, where she caressed her deceitfully. Her uncomprehending husband watched her, his mind burning and aching, dominated by the cruelest doubts.

"Mother, what's wrong?" she asked, affecting imaginary concern. "You're tired ... you must rest a bit."

Fulvia stared at her deeply, as if a flash of lucidity had suddenly enlightened her prostrate soul. The presence of her daughter had somehow calmed her aching heart and tormented conscience. With effort, she sat up in bed and caressed her daughter's hair as she always used to do in private. Then she lay back down and seemed willing to rest.

Emilianus Lucius left, realizing that his presence was no longer needed.

Aurelia, however, continued to speak with feigned concern:

"Mother, would you like a dose of sedative to help you sleep?"

The poor madwoman nodded affirmatively in her spiritual unawareness.

The younger woman went to her private room, took out a tiny tube from one of her favorite cabinets and let a few drops of the sedative fall into a small glass, saying to herself: "Yes! ... A secret must remain a secret ... and only death can keep it properly!"

She went without hesitation to her mother's bed, where the wretched woman had lain for more than two years, devoured by cancer and tormented by the most sinister and darkest visions.

In a blink, the terrible poisoning was over. After administering the corrosive and violent potion, Aurelia ordered two female slaves to watch over the sleeping patient – as she usually did after returning from her rowdy parties – and waited for the result of her criminal and unjustifiable act.

In a couple of hours the sick woman showed the obvious signs of suffocation from the corrosive poison, another of the mysterious and murderous potions of the time.

At the distressed call of the servants, everyone in the house stood by, given the alarming state of the ill woman.

Emilianus Lucius looked into her eyes, dimming under the veil of death, and in vain he tried to get the dying woman to say something. Her cold limbs were slowly stiffening, and reddish foam started seeping from her mouth.

Medical experts were called in during those final moments, but it was no use. In those days, not even the physicians understood the anatomical secrets of the organism, nor did they have a technical method for discovering the underlying causes of mysterious deaths. Fulvia's poisoning was believed to be an effect of the incomprehensible disease that had for many months undermined her health and vitality.

Nevertheless, her sudden death did not go unnoticed by Emilianus, and it added yet another doubt to the bitter thoughts that clouded his soul.

Aurelia tried to play her comedy of sentimentality as best she could under the circumstances. After a simple and quick funeral in light of the body's accelerated decomposition, forcing cremation within a few hours, the house of the former praetor Salvius Lentulus became the abode of two hearts that loathed each other.

The unfaithful wife returned to her life of sumptuous pleasures soon after the few days of mourning, whereas Emilianus

Lucius could not forget Fulvia's revelations on the day before her passing. He enveloped himself in a veil of sadness that darkened his heart for more than two years.

In 54, Domitius Nero[42] rose to power, accompanied by a depraved court of perverse courtiers and concubines as numerous as they were inhuman.

His mother Agrippina was too late in recognizing the inappropriateness of her maternal attitude obliging the emperor Claudius to consent to the marriage of his daughter Octavia to the one who would later deprive her of her life in a major plot of perversity.[43]

The Forum and the Senate trembled at receiving the sobering news of the Praetorian Guard's announcement of the new Caesar, not so much because of him personally, but because they knew beforehand that this unlearned and cruel prince would become an easy puppet for the most ambitious and perverse individuals of the Roman court.

No one, however, dared protest the series of dark crimes perpetrated with impunity so that Domitius Nero could arrive on the scene of supreme power.

In the year 56, the poisoning of young Britannicus[44] sent shivers of terror through all the patricians.

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[42] Fifth Roman emperor (ad 54–68), stepson and heir of the emperor Claudius. He became infamous for his personal debaucheries and extravagances and, on doubtful evidence, for his burning of Rome and persecutions of Christians. www.britannica.com. – Tr.

[43] Because Nero was only 16 when he succeeded Claudius, [his mother] Agrippina at first attempted to play the role of regent. Her power gradually weakened, however, as Nero came to take charge of the government. As a result of her opposition to Nero's affair with Poppaea Sabina, the Emperor decided to murder his mother. Inviting her to Baiae, he had her sent out on the Bay of Naples in a boat designed to sink, but she swam ashore. At Nero's orders she was eventually put to death at her country house. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

[44] Son of the Roman emperor Claudius by his third wife Messallina, [Britannicus] was born probably A.D. 41. . . . After the accession of Nero, Agrippina, by playing on his fears, induced him to poison Britannicus at a banquet (A.D. 55). http://www.1911encyclopedia.org. – Tr.

Shameful measures were put into practice to humiliate the senators of the Empire, and they were prevented from making any formal protests. All the most important families in the city knew that they were facing the poisonous potions of a Locusta[45], the tyranny and wickedness of a Tigelinus[46], or the dagger of an Anicetus[47].

The unexpected death of Britannicus, however, provoked a certain amount of discontent and encouraged some of the more valiant to protest.

Among these was Emilianus Lucius, who found himself in serious danger of banishment and was closely watched by the emperor's innumerable henchmen. The kindly official had decided to try to keep to himself to avoid further conflicts. His anguish had worsened and his ponderings had become deeper and more painful.

And then, during the early hours of a tranquil night, when, contrary to habit, he came home early, he noticed that his wife's room was filled with animated and happy voices. He soon realized that Aurelia and Plinius were giving free reign to their noxious passion. With eyes displaying overwhelming astonishment, he saw his wife betraying him right there in their own bed.

At witnessing that cruel reality for himself, Emilianus Lucius felt his sensitive and benevolent heart pierced by the sharpest thorn. He had an impulse to call her lover to the field of honor to kill or to be killed, but he realized that Aurelia did not deserve such a sacrifice.

Disgusted with everything related to the times he was living in, and feeling defeated by the misfortunes of his pain-

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[45] Serial murder has occurred throughout history. One of the earliest documented cases involved Locusta, a Roman woman hired by Agrippina the Younger, the mother of Nero, to poison several members of the imperial family; Locusta was executed in 69 A.D.. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

[46] Emperor Nero's chief adviser from 62 to 68, notorious for the influence his cruelty and debauched behavior had upon the emperor. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

[47] Involved in the killing of Agrippina. – Tr.

filled destiny, the noble official went to praetor Salvius's old office, where he had settled to accomplish his daily work. Yielding to a sinister resolution, he opened an old cabinet containing a row of small vials and took a specially shaped one to fulfill the bitter intention of his exhausted soul.

Gazing at the vial of hemlock, his sorrowful mind became lost for a few moments in poignant conjectures. At the peak of his desperation that night in light of his wife's betrayal, he carefully studied all the possibilities of his fate. He pondered the threat of exile or the likelihood of an attack in the shadows. The final consolation of death, as he saw it, was preferable.

In an instant, lacking the help of spirit friends to deter him due to the impulsiveness of this desperate and thoughtless act, he swallowed the contents. Then, he rested his youthful head on his arms and stretched out on a triclinium that had been adapted to the office and was covered with marble pieces and invaluable parchments.

His horrible death did not take long. While Aurelia put on a new farce of feigned mourning, Emilianus's suicide was discussed in the vast circle of his friendships not as being the direct consequence of his deep domestic disillusionment, but the fruit of the political tyranny of the new emperor, under whose reign so many crimes were being committed daily in the shadows.

Alone now in her field of action, Aurelia freely abandoned herself to her follies, increasing her noxious inclinations and trying harder than ever to keep the man of her choice, the object of her unbridled ambitions, close to her.

In the Lentulus and Severus homes, life continued with its litany of unhappiness.

More than five years earlier, in 57, Saul of Gioras had settled down permanently in Rome. He had not given up on his desires and plans having to do with the wife of his friend and

benefactor. With his fortune consolidated in the fur trade of the Orient, he never missed the smallest opportunity to show off the excellence of his financial situation to the woman he had coveted for so many years. Flavia Lentulia, however, had made her life a Calvary of moving and silent resignation.

To her, her husband's public life was prolonged and pain-filled suffering. Saul made indirect references to this fact from time to time in an attempt to make her aware of his affection, but the poor woman continued to see him as nothing more than a friend or a brother. In vain the young Jew testified to his personal admiration in gestures of extreme kindness as he tried to offer her his company; but the truth is that such appeals from his impetuous and impassioned soul did not resonate with the heart of the woman who was using pain to decorate the dignity of her marriage.

Impressed with Saul's offerings of money, Araxes stoked the fires of his hopes and did not let him lose heart while acting on his dangerous instincts.

Plinius Severus came home only once in a while, alleging duties or numerous trips to justify his ongoing absence. He was hardly aware that his astronomical spending was ruining his financial future little by little, and was also forcing his family to exhaust all their resources. Sometimes, he had affectionate conversations with his wife, to whom he felt bound by the ties of eternal and profound love, but the seductions of the world were already too strong in his heart to be uprooted. Deep down, he wanted to return to the peacefulness of his home, to his loving and tranquil life; however, wine, women and environments of luxury were the constant obsession of his weakened soul. At other times, although he loved his wife dearly, he could not accept her moral superiority and would become angry at her humility in the face of his follies. He would then return to Aurelia's arms like a victim torn between the forces of good and evil.

In the year 57, Calpurnia's extremely weakened health obliged her family to gather round the benevolent matron's bed. For the first time since his brother's marriage, Agrippa Severus returned from his long adventure in Massilia and Avenium to be with his ill and enfeebled mother in answer to her heartfelt desire. Seeing Flavia Lentulia again and sharing the joys of the home with her was like reactivating an old dormant volcano.

At one glance, he understood Plinius's marital situation and sought to be a replacement for the affection of his brother's solicitous, gentle wife. He wanted to confess all his ardent and unlucky love to her, but in his heart he held a sublime brotherly respect for the woman who confided in him as her beloved brother.

And so it was that during moments when the aging and ill woman felt better, Flavia would accept his company in order to distract herself at spectacles in the lively city of that time.

This was enough for Saul to poison these innocent distractions, imagining a dishonorable liaison and filling his violent and irascible heart with terrible jealousy.

At the earliest opportunity he insinuated all his deceitful suspicions to Plinius Severus, inventing with his unwholesome imagination situations and events that never happened. Flavia's husband was one of those capricious men who, despite operating within a circle of unlimited freedom for themselves, conceded nothing to their wives, not even on the terrain of the purest and most disinterested friendships. And so, Plinius Severus began to heed Saul's words, giving the utmost credit to the latter's unreasonable imagination. He, who had forsaken his loving companion and for many years had engendered the most painful domestic bitterness, was now burning with acute and inconceivable jealousy. He began to spy on his brother's smallest gestures and was suspicious of his wife's most secret

thoughts, waiting only for his mother's incurable disease to find its resolution in death – which seemed to be near – to more forcefully reclaim his conjugal rights.

The year 58 started out with a bitter outlook for our characters.

One fact, however, began to grab the attention of all the characters in this real and sorrowful story.

Livia's dedication to her ill old friend was a rare example of sisterly love, affection and indefinable goodness. For eight months straight, her slender, silent form was tirelessly at its post by Calpurnia's bed day and night, proving the excellence of her religious principles by example.

Calpurnia often pondered the moral superiority of that benevolent doctrine that had come into the world to lift up the fallen, comfort the sick and unfortunate, and give the most sublime hope to those disillusioned with their lot. Her old gods, who loved the wealthiest and those who offered the best sacrifices in the temples, were completely unlike the humble and poor Jesus, barefoot and crucified, whom Livia spoke about during their intimate and loving conversations.

Calpurnia was completely changed as she approached death. The ongoing close contact with her old friend had renewed all her most deeply rooted thoughts and beliefs. She was much kinder to the slaves who surrounded her bed and she asked Livia to teach her the prayers of the prophet crucified in Jerusalem, which they both said with folded hands when the patient's room was silent and deserted. Flaminius Severus's wife would then feel her pain subside, as if a soothing balm were refreshing the centers of her inner strength; her labored breathing would cease and her breathing would become almost normal, as if profound energies from the invisible plane were reanimating her sclerotic and fatigued heart.

Publius did not fail to notice these symptoms of moral change in the elderly matron, nor the noble behavior of his

wife, who had never rested from the moment she saw her friend helpless and exhausted. The sufferings of life had also greatly modified the structure of his spiritual make-up, and more than ever the senator felt the need to reconcile with his wife so that he could face the painful winter of approaching old age.

Not only he but Livia as well had passed a half century, and now that he was so familiar with life and its painful methods of spiritual growth, he felt capable of forgiving all his wife's shortcomings of the past. He realized that twenty-five years of moral martyrdom in the sacrosanct environment of the home were enough to redeem her of the errors she had perhaps committed in the illusions of youth and in a foreign land, as he had deduced from his erroneous observations resulting from the slander that had destroyed the happiness and peace of an entire life.

During the first days of the year 58, Calpurnia's suffering suddenly worsened and her painful death was expected at any moment.

Greatly overcome with emotion, her sons and closest friends surrounded her bed, although they realized she needed to rest her sick, spent body.

Two days before her death, the venerable woman asked to be left alone with the senator for a few hours, saying she needed to confide some arrangements to him *in extremis*.

He immediately attended her, and we find them in intimate conversation as though they were together for the last time to make decisions about important and significant matters.

Although Publius was still at full strength physically, his eyes were filled with tears as the old woman gazed at him with lucidity in her calm, deep eyes.

"Publius," she began gravely, as if these words would be her final counsel, "for souls with our background there can be no

fear of death, and this is why I have decided to speak with you in my final hours."

"But my good friend," replied the senator, frowning and making an effort to disguise his inner turmoil, remembering that he had spoken to Flaminius for the last time under the same circumstances within the walls of that very room, "only the gods can decide our fate and they alone have knowledge of our final moments!"

"I don't doubt such truths," agreed the brave patrician, "but I'm certain that my time on earth has come to an end and I don't want to go to the grave regretting a wrong I committed more than ten years ago."

"A wrong? Never ... Calpurnia, your life has always been one of the rarest examples of virtue in these times of transition and degeneration of our most beautiful customs."

"Thank you, my dear friend, but your kindness doesn't exempt me from my penitence before you. I must affirm that over ten years ago I made an error in judgment and I ask you today to accept my rectification, which is perhaps too late but still in time for us to sanctify a life of sacrifice and selflessness with the most just respect!"

Publius Lentulus realized that this was about his wife, and with his voice choked with emotion and tears, he let his old friend continue with dry eyes, showing the loftiest moral bravery in the face of impending death.

"I'm referring to Livia," continued Calpurnia in a moving tone, "about whom I had the misfortune of conveying a wrongful and unfair belief to you, thereby cutting off your last chance for happiness on earth. But death revamps our concepts of life, and those who are about to leave this world have a clearer vision of all the problems of existence. Today, my friend, I can tell you with a serene soul that your wife is blameless and innocent."

The senator felt tears filling his eyes, comforted to know that his venerable friend had now confirmed his conviction – which time had only increased – as to the integrity of his most noble life companion.

"I'm not telling you out of personal selfishness due to my gratitude to Livia's supreme dedication throughout this painful illness," she continued bravely. "People of our character must know the truth above all else, and my confession is not merely based on the observations of my wholly human weakness.

"The reality, my friend, is that ever since that night when you asked my opinion about your wife and my devoted friend, I have felt the thorns of cruel doubt in my tormented heart. Livia has always been my best friend, and to contribute unjustifiably to her unhappiness was, in my eyes, the supreme wrong of my entire life.

"For eleven years I prayed constantly and offered many sacrifices in the temples for the gods to instill the truth in me about the matter, and during that whole time I waited patiently for a revelation from heaven ... Only today, however, at the gates of the tomb was it granted to me!

"It is possible that my poor soul, already partly free, is participating in the incomprehensible mysteries of life beyond the grave, and perhaps that is why I saw the form of Flaminius in this very room this morning! ... It was very early and I was alone in my meditations and prayers."

As she spoke, the ill woman's words were interrupted now and then by the deep emotion that had come over her while Publius Lentulus wept in painful silence.

"Yes," continued Calpurnia after a long pause, "in the midst of a diffuse and bluish light I saw Flaminius reach out his loving, compassionate arms to me ... In his eyes I noticed the same expression of tenderness and in his voice the same, unforgettable and familiar timbre! ... He told me that within two days I would

enter the unfathomable mysteries of death … but this revelation of my approaching end did not surprise me … because for me … I who have lived for so many years in my exile of longing and darkness … added to the ongoing anguish of a long and painful illness … the certainty of death brings supreme consolation … Comforted by the sweet promises of this vision, which offered me gentle relief for a few hours … I asked Flaminius's spirit about the cruel doubt that had tormented me for so many years … All I had to do was become aware of it mentally for the radiant spirit to say to me … shaking his head in a delicate gesture … as if to express infinite and painful sadness: 'Calpurnia, during a time of evil you doubted the one you should have loved … and protected as a dear and loving daughter … because Livia … is blameless and innocent.'

"At that instant," continued the dying woman with some difficulty, "such was the dolorous jolt to my soul … from his unexpected reply … that I could no longer make out that loving and consoling vision … as if I had suddenly been called back to the sad realities of practical life."

The old matron's eyes were brimming with tears while the senator silently abandoned himself to the weeping of his painful emotions. They both remained in that state for some time, giving vent to their remorse and suffering.

Finally, it was again the brave patrician woman who broke the heavy silence, taking her friend's hands in her emaciated white ones, saying: "Publius, the heart of an old friend speaks to you with the serene and sad truths of death … Do you believe unreservedly in my painful revelations?"

The senator made an effort to dry the tears falling copiously from his eyes, and gathering his utmost strength, replied firmly: "Yes, I do."

"So what shall we do now … to make amends for our wrongs … against your wife's benevolent and just soul?"

A light of tenderness could be seen in his eyes, and passing his restless hands over his forehead as if he had found a nearly perfect solution, he addressed the dying woman, radiating joy and peace on his face:

"Have you heard about the grand State celebration that will take place in a few days, where senators with more than twenty years of service to the Empire will be crowned in triumph with myrtle and roses?"

"Yes," replied the matron, "in fact, despite my approaching death … I've asked my sons … to accompany you on this well-deserved joyful occasion … because you will be one of those honored by our highest authorities."

"Oh, my dear friend, no one expects you to die, because we would not be able to do without your precious contribution to our lives; but since we intend to make amends for my grave wrong in the pain-filled past, I will wait one more week to express my recognition, gratitude and deep love to Livia. I shall go to this celebration. It is to be held under the auspices of Seneca, who has done everything possible to hide the painful impression that the cruel conduct of the Emperor, his former student, has caused him. After receiving the crown of the highest victory of my public life, I shall place all the decorations at Livia's feet as a token of my esteem for her anguished life of pain-filled domestic sacrifices … I shall kneel before her sanctified figure, remove the garland of the Empire from my head and place the symbolic flowers at her feet, which I will humbly kiss in my repentance and tears, offering her infinite gratitude and love."

"An excellent idea, my son!" exclaimed the sick woman, deeply touched. "Please go through with it … when the time comes. And when you confess your supreme love to Livia … ask her to forgive me too … because I will weep with joy … from the peaceful darkness of my tomb … seeing both of you happy again."

They both wept silently, deeply moved.

The woman grasped her friend's hands as if to wish him a final goodbye. Calpurnia gazed at him with her large, clear eyes, emanating mysterious radiations, and with tears of inexpressible emotion, she said movingly:

"Publius ... I ask of you ... do not forget ... what you have promised ... Kneel at Livia's feet ... as if they were the feet of a goddess ... of selflessness and goodness ... Do not worry ... about my departure from this world ... Go to the Senate celebration ... We shall make amends for ... our grave wrong ... And now, my friend ... a final request ... Watch over my sons ... as if they were your own ... Teach them integrity ... strength ... sincerity and goodness ... One day ... all of us ... shall be reunited ... in eternity."

Deeply touched, Publius Lentulus clasped her hands and settled her white-haired head into the silky pillows while tears of emotion choked his voice.

For some time now, the woman had been stricken suddenly with attacks of sporadic and prolonged labored breathing.

The senator opened the doors of the spacious room, and Livia came running in her role of Calpurnia's constant nurse while Flavia and a few servants assisted with unguents and other medicines of the time.

Nonetheless, Calpurnia seemed beset by the final afflictions that would lead her to the tomb. For twenty-four hours her chest heaved and wheezed as if her thoracic cavity were about to burst under the impulse of an indomitable, mysterious force.

At the end of a day and night of bustling about and anguish, the sick woman seemed to improve slightly. Her breathing was less labored and her eyes revealed a great serenity, although her entire body was covered with blue and purplish blotches, announcing her death. Her loss of voice continued, but at one point she made a gesture with her hand, calling Livia to her bedside with the

tender familiarity of former times. The senator's wife answered her silent call and kneeled beside her, her eyes filled with tears. Through her spiritual intuition she understood that the sorrowful moment of farewell had come. Calpurnia wanted to speak, but could not. She held Livia lovingly against her breast, kissing her hair and face with the utmost effort. Pressing her lips against her ear, she said haltingly with infinite tenderness: "Livia, forgive me!" Only Livia heard the dying woman's soft whisper. Those were Calpurnia's last words. It could be said that her brave soul needed only make that final plea to be able to disengage itself from the earth and rise to Paradise.

Held by her tireless friend, the dying woman leaned her head back on the pillows again, this time forever. Sweat covered her entire body, which quickly began settling into rigor mortis, and in a few moments her eyes closed like someone preparing for a long sleep. Her breathing gradually stopped, while a large, pale tear rolled down her cheeks like a divine ray of light illuminating the night of the tomb.

The palace doors were opened for the loving tributes of Roman society. The funeral rites of the brave matron were attended by the noblest and finest of the city in its spiritual aristocracy, given the high esteem in which the rare virtues of the deceased woman were held.

With the cremation ceremonies over and the illustrious ashes of the patrician woman placed in the darkness of the family tomb, Flavia Lentulia assumed the management of the house while her parents returned to Aventinus for some needed rest.

There were only four days left until the grand celebrations would be held, where more than a hundred senators would receive the crown of supreme triumph in public life. Publius Lentulus would be one of those honored at the memorable celebration. Despite his family mourning, he looked forward to the great

moment. This was because, once he had received the highest expression of victory as a man of State, he would place it at his wife's feet as a perennial symbol of his love and recognition of a lifetime. In his heart he constructed the sweetest way to address his companion once again in the endearing and soothing tone his voice had lost twenty-five years ago. Proving the continuity of his ever-increasing love for his wife, he looked forward to the moment of their return to domestic happiness.

At night, during the long hours that passed as his old heart prepared itself for the blessings of marital happiness in a few days, he would approach his wife's private rooms, located quite far from his during those prolonged years of unending bitterness. Two nights before the evening of the grand festivities, it was eleven o'clock when he stood before his companion's room, anticipating the lucky moment of his penitence, signifying a supreme joy for him.

While his thought was immersed in the abyss of the long ago past, his spiritual attention was suddenly awakened by the soothing melody of a woman's voice singing softly in the silence of the night. The senator approached the door slowly and pressed his ear against it to listen ... Yes! Livia was singing in a faint, gentle voice like a forsaken skylark, strumming lightly the harmonious strings of a lyre of his dearest memories. Publius wept, deeply touched as he listened to her silvery tones dampened in the closed the room. It was as if Livia were singing to herself, lulling her humble, neglected heart to sleep, filling the sad and deserted hours of the night with consolation. It was the same composition of her husband's muses, her lips voicing strange and wonderful tonalities of an indescribable melancholy, as if her entire song were the sorrowful lament of a wounded nightingale:

"Twin soul of my soul,
Flower of the light of my life,

Sublime star fallen
From the beauties of the firmament!
When I was wandering in the world,
Sad and alone on my pathway,
You appeared, very gently,
And filled my heart.

You came with the blessing of the gods
In the divine brightness
To weave my happiness
In smiles of splendor!
You are my infinite treasure;
I swear my eternal allegiance to you,
For I am your hope,
Just as you are all my love!"

Twin soul of my soul,
If I lose you one day,
I will be the dark agony
Of longing in its veils ...
If one day you abandon me,
Tender light of my love,
I shall wait for you among the flowers,
From the brightness of the heavens...

In a few minutes the harmonious voice fell silent, as if forced to a divine halt. The senator withdrew with his eyes bathed in tears, reflecting in his heart: "Yes, Livia, two days from now I shall prove to you that you have always been the light of my whole life ... I shall kiss your feet in grateful humility and shall pour my repentance into your heart."

Entering Livia's room, we find her on bended knee, after placing the lyre of her memories on a beloved table. She is kneeling, as always, before Simeon's cross, which on this day reveals a more intense brightness to her spiritual sight.

In the midst of her prayers, Livia hears the words of her invisible friend, whose deep-toned voice seemed to be recorded forever in her innermost consciousness: "Daughter," says the friendly voice from the spirit realm, "Rejoice in the Lord, for the eve of your eternal and undying happiness is nigh! Lift your humble thoughts to Jesus, because the fortunate moment of your glorious entry into his Kingdom is at hand!"

Livia showed joy and surprise in her eyes, but filled with trust and faith in divine providence, she kept the comfort of those sacrosanct words hidden in the innermost recesses of her heart.

V
In the Catacombs[48] of Faith and the Circus of Martyrdom

On the very next day after the scene we have just described, we find two best friends together who, far from being mistress and servant, are two souls united by the same ideals and joined by the most sacred links of the heart.

Ana has just come home after running some errands at the Forum Olitorium[49]. Finding Livia alone, she said to her confidentially:

"Ma'am, tonight a new voice will be raised in the sanctuary of the catacombs for the preaching of our faith.

[48] Subterranean cemetery composed of galleries or passages with side recesses for tombs. http://www.britannica.com. – Tr.

[49] The produce market. – Emmanuel

Friends of ours notified me this morning that an emissary from the church at Antioch is in the city. His name is John of Cleophas and he brings significant revelations for us, the Christians of this city."

A light of inner glee shone in Livia's eyes:

"Ah, yes! ... We must go to the catacombs this evening. I feel the need to commune with our brethren in the belief and those who are in harmony with our faith! I must also thank the Lord for the mercy of his immense grace."

Raising her voice a bit, as if she wanted to communicate the holy exultation of her innermost hopes to her friend, she said with a tender smile radiating on her serene face:

"Ana, ever since Calpurnia died I've noticed that Publius is calmer and more understanding ... Over the past few days he has spoken to me with his former tenderness. Just yesterday he told me that he has reserved a sweet surprise for me tomorrow after his supreme victory in his public life. I feel that it is too late for us to be happy again in this world, but for the most part I am happy because I never wanted to die in disharmony with the companion that God granted me for the struggles and joys of life. I don't think he will ever forgive me for the crime of unfaithfulness that he believes I committed twenty-five years ago, but I weep with happiness at seeing that he feels that I have redeemed myself in his harsh eyes!"

And deeply moved, she wept, while the elderly maid assured her tenderly:

"Yes, ma'am, perhaps he has recognized your sanctifying selflessness during these long years of blessed sacrifice in your home."

"I thank Jesus for such mercy," replied Livia, touched. "I really think that it won't be long before I depart for the world of heavenly realities, where all sufferers must be consoled."

After a slight pause, she continued:

"Just yesterday when I was praying next to the simple cross in my room, I heard a voice announcing that the Kingdom of Jesus would be coming soon."

Listening to her, Ana suddenly remembered Simeon and the moments before his sacrifice, and she immersed herself in sorrowful musings. Her memories were returning to the distant past, when Livia's voice aroused her once again:

"Ana," she said with the heroic determination of her faith, "I don't know how I will be called by the Messiah, but in the event of my imminent departure, I would ask you to remain in this house to carry on your dedication of work and sacrifice, because Jesus will surely bless you for your holy labor."

The old servant of the Lentulus family wanted to change the course of the poignant conversation, and said with the wise serenity for which we know her:

"Ma'am, God knows which of us will go first. Let's drop this matter for now and think only of your sanctified joys."

And to bring the anguished effect of that intimate conversation to an end, she finished by asking confidentially:

"So, are we really going to go the catacombs this evening?"

"Yes, it's decided. At nightfall we will leave for our prayers and loving memories of the Nazarene Messiah. I feel the need for such spiritual respite after the long months at my dear Calpurnia's side. Besides, I want to ask the brethren to pray for her with me while at the same time showing the Lord my sincere thanks for his divine grace.

"When we leave, please remind me to take a donation to the new apostle for the church at Antioch.

"If tomorrow Publius is going to receive the supreme award of a man of the world, I want to beseech Jesus not to abandon his intrepid and benevolent soul, so that the vanities of earth do not keep him from seeking the wonderful kingdom of heaven some day!"

And so, with the matter settled, they went their separate ways in the bustle of their household chores. While the senator spent the whole day taking numerous precautions so that the personal brilliance of his great triumph of the following day would lack nothing, Livia spent her time with her soul focused on Christ in fervent prayer.

As planned, at nightfall they went to the secret meeting of the early practices of Christianity.

None of the high-ranking servants in the villa were concerned or even surprised at seeing them leave. Throughout the long period of Calpurnia's illness, neither Livia nor Ana had stayed at home all the time, and it would not be considered odd if they both had decided to go to the Severus home that night, and possibly not return until the following day after comforting Flavia, weary from her tiring domestic chores.

The hours passed, calm and carefree; and when the senator approached his wife's room in anticipation of the profound joys he was expecting the next day, he assumed from the heavy silence reigning there that it meant she was calmly reposing on the light, caressing wings of sleep. Thinking that Livia was resting in the supreme peace of the night, Publius Lentulus withdrew to his private office with his mind filled with radiant hope in his resolution to do penance for all his past wrongs.

Livia, however, was with Ana, taking advantage of the first shadows of the evening to reach the catacombs.

It was after seven when the two hid themselves among the deserted boulders that gave access to the underground, where the old dust of the dead had accumulated.

In a vast vaulted space that had formerly been used for the meetings of funeral cooperatives, a large number of people had gathered around the friendly and benevolent figure of the

enlightened preacher who had arrived from distant Syria. In one corner stood a makeshift podium, which John of Cleophas would ascend in a few minutes with the aura of sweetness that surrounded his singular personality.

The apostle from Antioch displayed the first strings of white hair, and his entire figure was permeated with a strong personal magnetism that connected him closely to all who came near him, drawn by the sweet affinity of faith and profound sentiments.

Everyone seemed taken by his captivating and impressive sermon, which lasted for nearly two hours, falling on the hearts of his listeners like a sublime dew of heavenly eloquence. Lofty concepts and prophetic remarks resounded throughout the silent, dark vault, dimly lit by the light of a few torches.

In fact, the congregation did have reason to be electrified with that dolorous and sublime prophesying, for John of Cleophas delivered his profound address more or less in these terms:

"Brothers, may the peace of the Lamb of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, be with you in your inner conscience and in the sanctuary of your hearts!

"In his prayers and meditations each day, the holy patriarch of Antioch has received several revelations from the Messiah ordering a messenger to be sent to you here in the capital of the world in order to proclaim great things to you.

"Through the revelations of the Holy Spirit, the Christians of this impious city have been chosen by the Lamb to make the great sacrifice. In the name of his dearly beloved apostles, I have come to proclaim our imminent entry into Jesus' Kingdom!

"Yes, because here, where all the divine glories have been mocked and humiliated by the people's impenitence, is also where the first great collisions of the forces of good and evil must come together in battle, foreshadowing the final establishment of the divine, eternal message of the Lord's Gospel in the world!

"At the final general meeting of the believers in Antioch, voices from heaven manifested in tongues of fire, just as had occurred in the glorious days of the apostles' assembly after the divine resurrection of our Savior; and I, your servant, was chosen as the emissary of this comforting news, because the heavenly voices have promised us the Kingdom of the Lord in a few days.

"Dearly beloved, I believe that we are on the brink of the most excruciating testimony of our faith through redemptive suffering, but the cross of Calvary must illumine the painful night of our hardship.

"I too had the joy of hearing the word of the Lord in the final hours of his dolorous agony in this world. What did he ask, my dear ones, but the Father's infinite forgiveness of his implacable tormentors? No, we cannot doubt these revelations from heaven ... Unflinching executioners are hounding our steps and I bring you a message of love and strength in our Lord Jesus Christ!

"Rome will baptize its new faith with the blood of the righteous and the innocent; but it is also important to remember that the immaculate Lamb of God Almighty sacrificed himself on the cross of infamy to pay for the sins and degradations of the world!

"Perhaps we will walk these luxurious avenues as if on new streets of a rotting Jerusalem, filled with desolation and bitterness ... Heavenly voices have proclaimed that we will be disdained, humiliated, despised and defeated; but the supreme victory of the Lord awaits us beyond the thorny palms of martyrdom in the sweet light of his kingdom, inaccessible to suffering and death!

"We will wash with our blood and tears the iniquity of this precious marble, but one day, my brothers, all this Babylonia of unrest and sin will topple over noisily under the

weight of its ignoble wretchedness ... A destroying gale will knock over all the false idols and will confound the pretentious lies of their altars ... Painful torrents of destruction and time will rain down upon this powerful Empire, bringing the ruin of poverty and the saddest forgetfulness of its might ... The circuses of impiety will disappear under a handful of ashes, the Forum and the Senate of the unrepentant will be confounded by the supreme divine justice, and the proud warriors of this dissolute city will crawl one day like worms along the banks of the same Tiber that bore their iniquity!

"Then, new Jeremiahs will weep over this marble under the merciful light of the night ... the luxurious palaces on these lofty, graceful hills will fall in a grievous whirlwind of fright, and over its proud monuments of selfishness and vanities the sad winds of silent and deserted nights will moan.

"Happy are they who weep now out of love for the Divine Master; blessed are all they who spill their blood for the sublime truths of the Lamb, for in heaven there are divine dwellings for the blessed ones of Jesus."

The emissary from the church at Antioch spoke in a soft, grave voice and his words echoed in the profound silence of the secluded crypt.

Nearly two hundred people were gathered there, listening to him attentively.

Most of these early Christians were weeping in rapture. A gentle, mystical exaltation soared deep in their souls, enabling them to feel the sweet emotions of all those many unnamed apostles who had already fallen in the ignominious arenas of the circuses to cement with blood and tears the edification of the new faith.

After these singular and dolorous prophesies had filled their souls with indescribable flashes of inner joy at foreseeing

the glorious Kingdom of Jesus, John was asked about various matters of general interest for the advancement and development of the new doctrine – as was customary in the early gatherings of nascent Christianity– and he answered all of them with the sincerest expressions of fraternal kindness.

Asked by one of the attendees the reason for his radiant joy at the revelations of the Holy Spirit announcing such great trials and so much suffering, the benevolent emissary replied with sublime optimism:

"Yes, my friends, we are anticipating the sacred fulfillment of the prophecies, but we must realize with joy that if Jesus allows the impious to create wonderful monuments such as the ones in this sumptuous and corrupt city, what has he not reserved, in his infinite mercy, for the good and just in the light of his Kingdom?"

These consoling replies fell upon the souls of the large assembly like a soothing balm.

Words of love and affectionate greetings were exchanged among all in the sweetest demonstrations of joy and fraternity.

A light of inner joy shone in Livia's and Ana's serene eyes.

At the end of the meeting everyone rose for the simple and spontaneous prayers of the early lessons of Christianity in its pure beginnings.

The voice of the emissary from Antioch was heard once more, brilliant and clear:

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. May your Kingdom of mercy come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

At that moment, his tender and moving words were drowned out by the sinister clanking of armor.

"They're in here, Luculus!" yelled the deafening voice of centurion Claudius Varrus, who advanced with several of

his praetorians toward the astonished crowd of defenseless Christians, constituted mainly of women.

Some of the most incensed believers began putting out the torches, bringing darkness to the confusion and tumult, but the radiant and impressive figure of John of Cleophas stepped down from the podium.

"Brothers," he urged with a strange and vibrant voice as if it were imbued with an extraordinary magnetism, "the Lord told us never to hide our candle under a bushel! Do not quench the light that must illumine our example of courage and faith!"

By now, the two centurions had combined their forces, organizing the fifty men that had come under their orders in case of any resistance.

Then, at the astounded silence of those present, the apostle from Antioch walked fearlessly up to Luculus Quintilius, held out his arms peacefully to him and requested earnestly:

"Centurion, do not be afraid to carry out your task, for I have come to Rome only for the glories of sacrifice."

The agent of the Empire was unimpressed, and after brandishing his sword in the missionary's face, he quickly tied his arms, making it impossible for him to move.

Giving free rein to their ardent and sincere temperaments, two young believers, disgusted by such cruelty, drew their own swords, which glittered in the pale light of that shadowy interior, and advanced toward the soldiers in a supreme gesture of defense and resistance. But John of Cleophas admonished them once more with his magnetic and profound speech:

"My sons, do not repeat in this sanctuary the same painful scene of the Messiah's imprisonment. Remember Malchus and sheathe your swords, because those who wound with iron will be wounded with iron."

Quietness and amazement fell upon the gathering. The serene courage of the apostle had touched every heart.

During the major events of life, a spiritual vibration always flows from other worlds to comfort afflicted travelers on their earthly journey.

And so the inconceivable and unexpected occurred: everyone present imitated the brave apostle, offering their defenseless arms to the sacrifice.

In her own moment of pain, Livia was filled with a courage she had never possessed. The surprised look of the persecutors lingered at length on her noble figure and patrician clothing. In that gathering, she was the only woman bearing the insignia of a Roman patrician.

Claudius Varrus carried out his task somewhat more respectfully, and a few minutes later the large caravan was on its way to prison in the dense darkness of midnight.

In some ways, the jail where the Christians were about to spend so many hours huddled together in anguished and filthy conditions represented a gentle consolation for them. It was located next to the large circus, whose gigantic proportions urge us to take a closer look at it to give the reader an idea of its size.

The Circus Maximus[50] was situated in the valley that separated the two hills, Palatinus and Aventinus. It rose up as

[50] The Circus Maximus was occasionally used for events such as processions or gladiator combats, but on most days only chariot races with quadrigaes, pulled by four horses, were held here. The races themselves were wildly popular with people fanatically supporting one of the four factions: red, white, green and blue representing summer, winter, spring and autumn, respectively. Bets were placed on one of the factions and supporters of the different factions often clashed, sometimes resulting in deaths among the spectators.

The last race at the Circus Maximus was held in AD 549, almost a millennium after the first races were held at this location. Today, only the layout of the original circus can be seen on what is now a large grassland. Most of the original structure was used as building material for medieval and Renaissance constructions. http://www.aviewoncities.com/rome/circusmaximus.htm. – Tr.

one of the most beautiful marvels of the unvanquished city. Built during the early days of Rome, its massive proportions had developed along with the city, and in the time of Domitius Nero it was at its largest, 2,190 feet long and 960 feet wide, ending in a semicircle, with a capacity of three hundred thousand comfortably seated spectators. Two tiers of superimposed porticos ran along both sides, adorned with costly columns and crowned with comfortable terraces. That luxury of construction and excess of decoration housed several taverns and innumerable places of debauchery, in whose shadow the indigent slept and the majority of the people rested, inebriated and languorous in the most revolting pleasures. Six square towers, denoting the highest expressions of good taste in the architecture of the epoch, dominated the terraces, serving as luxurious boxes for the most distinguished personalities during the spectacles of the grand gala. Wide stone benches, arranged to follow the amphitheater's form, ran along three sides, and immediately after, located in a straight line was the space occupied by the dungeons, from which horses and chariots as well as slaves and prisoners, wild animals and gladiators, exited for the favorite pastime of Roman society. Above the dungeons the sumptuous pavilion of the Emperor was erected, from where the highest authorities and courtiers accompanied Caesar in his entertainments. The arena was divided lengthwise by a wall six feet high and twelve feet long, upon which rose altars and costly statues, adorned in fine gilded bronze. Right in the center of this wall and lending a majestic touch of grandeur to the place, stood the famous obelisk of Augustus[51], rising to a height of 120 feet. It dominated

[51] The first of the obelisks of the Circus Maximus was placed there around the year 0 by Emperor Augustus, who had it brought over from Egypt. This obelisk now stands in the centre of the Piazza del Popolo in Rome. It is made of red granite and is still very imposing as it stands 23.91m tall (approx 70ft), which, with the pedestal and decoration on top, make it reach 36.43m (about 120ft). It originally belonged to the Egyptian

the arena colored in green and red, giving the impression of a verdant lawn suddenly stained with flowers of blood.

The miserable prisoners of that human hunt were thrown into a large dungeon area during the first hours of dawn.

The soldiers stripped them one by one of their valuables and the small amounts of money they had brought with them. Not even the women escaped this humiliating plunder, and were robbed of their most precious jewels. Due to the respect inspired by her clothing, only Livia was spared this shameless ordeal.

In a private office, Claudius Varrus informed his superior, Cornelius Rufus, of the success of the operation that had been entrusted to him that night.

"Yes," said Cornelius, pleased, "from what I can see, tomorrow's celebration will make the Emperor very happy. This first hunt of Christians is essential for the glorious celebration of tribute to the senators."

"But listen," he continued more discreetly, referring to Livia, "who is that woman wearing a toga of the highest social class?"

"I don't know," replied the centurion, rather pensively. "As a matter of fact, I was surprised to find her in such an environment, but I obeyed your orders to the letter."

"You did well."

However, as if reevaluating the situation, Cornelius Rufus added:

"We'll keep her here until tomorrow, until the time of the spectacle, and then we'll release her."

"Why not now?"

"In her position of nobility, she might incite some protest against Caesar's decision, and that would put us in an awkward situation. And since during the final phase of

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Pharaoh Ramses the II in the 13th Century BC. http://www.mariamilani.com/ancient_rome/circus_maximus.htm. – Tr.

the afternoon's entertainment these miserable creatures will be thrown to the lions as slaves condemned to their last punishment, it would not behoove us to discredit ourselves in front of her family. By holding her here, we satisfy Nero's whims, and then by letting her go afterwards, we won't antagonize those in power."

"True, that would be the most reasonable solution. But why will these people be condemned as slaves when they ought to die as Christians, which is the only reason for their just condemnation? Isn't the reason for their death the humiliating doctrine they profess?"

"Yes, but we have to consider the fact that the Emperor doesn't yet feel he has enough strength to confront the opinion of the senators, the aediles[52] and various other authorities who might advocate the cause of these wretches in disrespect of him and his closest advisers ... However, I have no doubt that the persecution of the followers of the hateful doctrine of the Crucified will be made official within a few days[53] as soon as the imperial powers are more strongly centralized.

"So, let's wait a little longer; until then, let's build up Nero's prestige, because the holder of power must always come across as the best of friends."

While this was happening, all the Christians were being divided into groups inside the dungeon, exchanging their personal impressions of this anguishing ordeal.

At one point, a door opened and in came the despicable figure of Claudius, exclaiming sarcastically:

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[52] Roman magistrates responsible for the games and the maintenance of the temples. – Tr.

[53] The majority of historians of the Roman Empire designate the first persecution of Christianity only in the year 64; however, in 58 some of Nero's favorites managed to initiate a criminal movement; hence, it should be noted that, even before the city's great fire, early Christians were led to their death as wretched slaves for the amusement of the people. – Emmanuel

"Christians, Caesar offers no clemency to those who profess the dangerous doctrines of the Nazarene. If you have any personal matters to resolve, remember that it is too late now, because only a few hours separate you from the lions in the arena."

The heavy door closed behind him, while the unfortunate prisoners were bitterly surprised with this unsettling and dolorous news.

Observing the movements of the numerous soldiers that guarded them through the reinforced bars, they gave way to the most anguished thoughts in those first moments. The serenity returned quickly, however, and the prisoners became humbly still. Some prayed fervently, while others shared thoughts in low voices.

The jail-keepers hastened to separate the women and put them in an adjoining space, where each group of believers stood with their souls turned toward Jesus in the final moments as they awaited death.

Early in the morning, with the sun having barely risen to its fullness in the beautiful Roman sky, we find Ana and Livia alone in an almost serene conversation behind a sort of screen of the many scattered in the large room reserved for the women. Several of their companions seemed to be resting, disoriented.

"Ma'am," said the servant, somewhat concerned, "I've noticed that they are treating you with sympathy and respect here. Why don't you plead for your immediate release? We don't know what sinister and terrible things will happen to us in the painful hours of this day!"

"No, my dear Ana," Livia replied serenely, "I can assure you that my soul is rightly prepared for death. And even if I didn't feel comforted, you mustn't make such a suggestion, because Jesus, even though he was the Master of all masters and Lord of the kingdom of heaven, did not plead with his tormenting and oppressing executioners for his release."

"That is true, Ma'am. But I believe that Jesus would understand if you did because you still have a husband and a daughter," stressed the elderly maid as if reminding her of her human commitments.

"A husband?" replied the noble matron with heroic serenity. "Yes, I thank God for the peace he has granted me by allowing Publius to show me his contrition the past few days. For me that was the only essential and necessary serenity, because I lost my husband in his human form twenty-five years ago ... In vain I sacrificed all the impulses of my youth to prove my love and innocence to him against the slander with which they humiliated my name. For a quarter of a century I have lived with my prayers and my tears ... my longing has been grievous and the spiritual exile to which I was relegated in my purest affections has been heartbreaking.

"I do not believe that the old trust, filled with happiness and tenderness, can be revived for me in my husband's heart.

"As for my daughter, I have surrendered her to Jesus ever since the days of her childhood, when I was forced into the terrible separation from her love. I was kept from her soul by Publius's imposition, and I had to repress the sweetest devotion of my maternal heart. The Lord knows of my anguish during the silent, sad nights when I confided to him my bitter suffering. Besides, Flavia now has a husband who has sought to isolate her even more from my poor soul because he is afraid of my faith. Everyone sees it as madness."

And after a brief pause in her painful confidence, she emphasized with calm sadness:

"For me hope can no longer blossom here on earth ... My only wish now is to die in peace, comforted by my conscience."

"But Ma'am," replied the maid vehemently, "today is the day of your husband's greatest victory."

"I haven't forgotten. Even so, Publius has been heading in a direction opposite my own for twenty-five years now, and with his receiving today the supreme recompense of the world as the final triumph of his desires, let me also seek not the victory of heaven, which I do not deserve, but the possibility of showing the Lord the sincerity of my faith, anxious for the enlightening blessings of his infinite mercy.

"Further, my dear Ana, it is very pleasing to my heart to dream of his hallowed and merciful kingdom ...To see again the gentle hands of the Messiah blessing our souls with his generous charity and tenderness!"

Livia had a divine light in her eyes, which were moistened with spontaneous tears as if the dew of paradise had fallen on her heart.

It was clear that her thoughts were not on the earth, but floating in a world of gentle illumination, filled with loving memories of the past and imbued with tender hopes in the love of Jesus Christ.

"Yes," she continued, as if speaking only to her own soul in the intimacy of her heart, "lately I've been recalling much of the Divine Master and his unforgettable words ... On that unforgettable day of his preaching, the sun was still setting, yet the sky was already adorned with stars as if the lights of the firmament also wanted to hear him ... The waves of Lake Tiberias – often so turbulent with the blowing of the wind – arrived silently to dissolve into a fan of spray as they met the boats on the beach in a sweet expression of respect when his divine teachings were heard across the landscape! Everything became softly still, and it was wonderful to see the angelic smiles of little children, gazing at the tender light of his eyes as the shepherd of people and nature...

"My good Ana, I so longed to adopt all those ragged, starving little ones who would turn up at the people's gatherings

in Capernaum; but my maternal intent to protect those disdained, neglected women and those tattered children, who lived in destitution, could not find fulfillment in this world ... However, I believe that I will come to realize the ideals of my soul if Jesus will receive me into the light of his Kingdom."

The old servant wept with emotion at hearing these touching and moving words.

After a long pause, Livia continued as if she wanted to take full advantage of her final hours:

"Ana," she said with persuasive calmness, "we have both been called to give sacred testimony to the faith in these final moments which must be glorious for our soul. Forgive me if at any time I have offended you with undeserving words. Even before Simeon turned you over to my care, I already loved you tenderly as if you were my sister or my own daughter!"

The servant wept, touched deeply, while Livia continued tenderly:

"Now, my dear, I have a final request."

"Tell me, Ma'am," whispered the servant with her eyes filled with tears, "before anything else, I am your slave."

"Ana, if it is true that we must testify to our faith before this day is over, I would like to appear at the sacrifice like those hapless creatures who heard the divine consolations by Lake Tiberias. If you would help me, switch your servant's tunic for my patrician's toga! I would like to participate in the sacrifice wearing the humble and poor raiment of the people, not because I feel humiliated in front of those of my own status at the blessed moment of testimony, but because, rending the final preconceptions of my birth forever, I would give my Christian conscience the comfort of this final act of humility ... I, who was born among the purple robes of nobility, would like to seek the Kingdom of Jesus in the simple

vestments of those who pass through the world in a painful existence of poverty and toil!"

"Ma'am!" demurred the hesitant servant.

"You won't hesitate if you want to provide me this last satisfaction."

Faced with the pious request of that benevolent woman, Ana couldn't refuse. In an instant, in the half-darkness of the makeshift retreat that separated them from their other companions, they exchanged toga and tunic, which were really just a type of cloak over the complicated raiment of the epoch. Livia adorned her fine woolen toga, now on her servant's body, with the discreet jewels that she usually wore. After giving her two costly rings and a graceful bracelet, only one adornment of value was left, but passing her hand over her throat and caressing a small necklace with great tenderness, Livia said decisively to her companion:

"I shall keep only this little necklace, which has a cameo with Publius's profile in high relief. It was a present from him on our wedding day long ago. I shall die wearing this bit of jewelry, as if it were a symbol of the union between my two loves – my husband and Jesus Christ."

Without protest, Ana accepted all her mistress's pious wishes, and in a few moments, in her virginal beauty, the servant's humble bearing was touched by a striking nobleness, as if she were a sovereign figure in old ivory.

The hours of the day went by heavily and slowly for all the prisoners in the terrible unrest that oppressed them, in spite of the sweet inner clarity of prayer that joined them together in the moral courage needed for their death. With the resigned heroism of his religious fervor, John of Cleophas managed to keep the fire of faith alive in all their hearts, and there was no lack of the brave who, in the exaltation of their trust in Divine

Providence, rehearsed the songs of spiritual glory for the final moment of their martyrdom.

In the Aventine palace the domestic servants all believed that Livia was at her daughter's house; however, just before noon, Flavia Lentulia came to see her father in order to kiss him before his triumph.

As the senator told her about his plan to reestablish their former domestic happiness with the most expressive public demonstrations of trust and love for his wife, Flavia, much to her father's surprise, went to look for her mother to share her understandable happiness with her.

An apprehensive, questioning look appeared on every face.

In twenty-five years, this was the first time that Livia and Ana had been away from the house overnight, causing the most justified fears.

The senator felt his heart grieved with anguished premonitions, but the slaves were waiting to take him to the Senate, where the first ceremonies would begin shortly after noon with Caesar in attendance. Seeing his affliction and his anxious look, Flavia Lentulia sought to calm him with these words, which disguised her own affliction:

"Go in peace, Father. I'll go home now to get everything ready, because when you return this afternoon with your crown of triumph, Mother and I will want to embrace you amid the flowers in the vestibule so that she and I can welcome you with our devoted and incessant love."

"Yes, my daughter," replied the senator with a shadow of anguish, "may the gods make it so, because the roses of this house will be my greatest reward!"

Hailed by many friends who were waiting for him, Publius Lentulus ascended his litter and headed toward the Senate, where enthusiastic multitudes, sparkling with joy in

gratitude for the abundant distribution of wheat with which the Roman authorities were commemorating the event, applauded the honored with the deafening shouts typical of major popular spectacles.

The most elegant oratory flourishings were offered from the great political building to exalt the Emperor's personality. Preceded by the impressive figure of Caesar himself, who never disdained the resounding pageantry of great spectacles, the senators went to the famous Temple of Jupiter. There, the honorees would receive crowns of myrtle and roses as victors in accordance with an idea of Seneca, who made every effort to undo the grim impact of the cruel government of his former disciple, who, in the end, would decree his tutor's death in the year 66. In the Temple of Jupiter, Domitius Nero, the "great artist," crowned the heads of more than one hundred senators of the Empire under the conventional blessing of the priests. The ceremony lasted for several hours due to the complicated religious ritual. Only after three o'clock in the afternoon did the large and massive procession head out from the temple toward the Circus Maximus. In a solemn mood rarely seen in Rome in later centuries, the procession headed first toward the Forum, passing through the formidable mass of people showing the utmost respect.

For our readers' understanding, we shall give a faint idea of this magnificent parade, typical of the great public ceremonies of the epoch.

It is led by a superbly and magnificently decorated chariot, where the Emperor is seated languidly. Numerous chariots follow, in which the honored senators are seated as well as their favorite courtiers.

Domitius Nero, with one of his most esteemed favorite courtiers next to him, passes arrogantly in his red victory attire with the gaudy sumptuousness characteristic of his personality.

Next, a large group of fifteen year-old youths passes on horseback and on foot, escorting the chariots of honor and leading the way.

Then the charioteers pass by, driving the bigas, quadrigas and sejuges, which are respectively two-, four- and six-horse chariots used for the frenzied excitement of the traditional races.

Following the charioteers come the athletes, almost fully nude, who will participate in the major and minor games of the afternoon. After them come three classical choruses of dancers, the first consisting of adults, the second of winsome adolescents, and the third of cute little children, all displaying scarlet tunics girded with copper belts with swords at their side and spears in their hands, with their bronze helmets decorated with plumes and crests to complete their extravagant garb. These dancers are followed by musicians exhibiting rhythmic movements and performing warlike ballets to the sound of ivory harps, small flutes and numerous lutes.

After the musicians, like a band of sinister buffoons, come the Satyrs and Sileni[54], strange characters wearing horrifying masks and covered with goat skins, under which they make the most horrendous gestures, provoking hysterical laughter from the spectators with their ridiculous and strange contortions. Following them are other musical groups accompanied by various secondary ministers of the cult of Jupiter and other gods, carrying large receptacles in the guise of gold and silver incense-burners, with dizzying clouds of incense spiraling from them.

Following the ministers come the statues of numerous divinities adorned with gold and precious stones, wrenched for

[54] In Greek mythology, creatures of the wild, part man and part beast, who in Classical times were closely associated with the god Dionysus. Their Italian counterparts were the Fauns. Satyrs and Sileni were at first represented as uncouth men, with a horse's tail and ears . . . [or] a goat's legs and tail. www.britannica.com. – Tr.

a moment from their sumptuous and peaceful temples. Each statue, in its symbolic expression, is accompanied by its devotees or by its various priestly chapters. All these images of great pomp are driven in chariots of ivory or silver, pulled by magnificent horses carefully led by poor boys ten to twelve years old, having living fathers and mothers, and escorted attentively by the most prominent patricians of the great city.

It is all a dazzle of gold crowns, purple robes, luxurious fabrics from the Orient, shining metals and glittering precious stones.

A legion of priests and cult ministers ends the procession, followed by the interminable mass of the anonymous and unknown populace.

The gigantic procession enters the Great Circus with utmost circumspection in observance of the highest solemnities. The silence is interrupted only by the partisan acclamations of the different groups of citizens as they pass by the statue of the divinity that protects their activities and professions in their everyday lives.

After a solemn turn around the inside of the arena, the silent ivory figures are placed in the chapel next to the jails beneath the radiant splendor of the Emperor's pavilion. Prayers and sacrifices of both the nobility and the plebeians are offered in this chapel, while Caesar and his courtiers join the honored politicians on that afternoon to partake of numerous and excessive libations.

Once the ceremonies are finished, the silent contemplation of the crowd also comes to an end.

Then the games begin under the eager eyes of more than three hundred thousand spectators. These are not confined to the massive crowds jammed into the enormous area of the luxurious stadium. The palaces of Aventinus and

Palatinus, as well as the elegant terraces of Caelius[55], also serve as grandstands for numerous attendees who cannot see the formidable spectacle close up. Rome is having a good time, and all of its classes are dazzled.

The chariot competition is the first event, but enthusiastic applause is heard only after the first charioteers have died in the arena and the first horses have been torn to pieces.

The players are distinguishable by the colors of their tunics. There are those who are dressed in red, blue, white and green, representing various teams, while the audience is divided into loud and fanatical fans and supporters. Admirers and members of each team scream passionately, showing their joy, fear, dismay or impatience. At the end of the first event there are fisticuffs between this or that faction in the midst of the enormous crowd, with serious disturbances that immediately degenerate into crimes of rage, from which a few dead bodies are then removed.

After the races a make-believe hunt takes place, entailing terrible battles between men and beasts, in which young slaves lose their lives in tragic circumstances to the frenzied cheering of the unconscionable crowd.

The Emperor smiles in satisfaction and leisurely continues drinking with some of his closest friends. Six harpists play his favorite melodies in the pavilion while the sweet, clear sounds of the lutes can also be heard.

Various other amusing and terrible games followed, and after a few exotic dances in the arena, one of Domitius Nero's favorite courtiers leaned over discreetly and said in his ear:

"The moment has arrived, O Augustus, for the biggest surprise of the games this afternoon!"

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[55] Three of the seven hills of Rome, known respectively in Latin as "Mons Palatinus, Mons Capitolinus, Mons Quirinalis, Mons Viminalis, Mons Esquilinus, Mons Caelius, and Mons Aventinus." www.britannica.com. – Tr.

"Are the Christians going to enter the arena now?" asked the Emperor in a low voice, with his cold, ruthless smile.

"Yes, the order already has been given for twenty African lions to be released into the arena as soon as the guilty ones are presented in public."

"A nice tribute to the senators!" remarked Nero sarcastically. "This celebration has been a happy reminder of Seneca, because it will give me the opportunity to show the Senate that law is power and all power must be mine."

Only a few minutes remained before the surprise event of the afternoon, when Claudius Varrus counseled one of his trusted aides:

"Aton," he said circumspectly, "you can get ready for the entry of all the prisoners into the arena, but discreetly isolate a woman who is wearing a patrician toga. Save her till last and then throw her back into the street. We don't want complications with her family."

The soldier made a sign, confirming he would faithfully execute his orders. In a few moments, the large group of Christians, under the insulting words and jeers of the lowest servitors of the Circus, began walking intrepidly to their deaths...

First came John of Cleophas, murmuring his final prayer.

Just as the huge gate was opened, through which could be heard the threatening roaring of the famished lions, Aton approached Ana, and noticing her fine woolen toga and the discreet jewels adorning her noble appearance, as well as the delicate gold net that gracefully secured her hair, he said respectfully, admiring the nobility of her bearing:

"Madam, you will remain here until further notice!"

The elderly maid of the Lentulus family exchanged a meaningful and anguished look with her mistress, and then replied with serene pride:

"But why? Do you wish to deprive me of the glory of the sacrifice?"

Aton and his assistants were surprised by this attitude of profound spiritual heroism, and after an evasive gesture that expressed his hesitation in giving the reply that was his duty, Aton stated respectfully:

"You shall go last!"

That explanation seemed to satisfy her. In that decisive moment of separation, Livia and Ana exchanged a loving, anguished and unforgettable look.

All of this took only a few seconds, because the ominous gate was now open and the threatening weapons of Domitius Nero's agents forced the prisoners to head toward the arena like a block of condemned prisoners to the terror of their final punishment.

The venerable apostle from Antioch was first in line with brave serenity. His heart was lifted to the Infinite in sincere, fervent prayer. In a few moments all the prisoners huddled together at the entrance to the arena, imbued with a moral strength they had never known before, for behind those sumptuous purple robes, and beyond the shrill laughter and the sinister insults, was a legion of heavenly messengers strengthening the spiritual fortitude of those who were to succumb to a shameful death to water the seeds of Christianity with their prolific tears. A luminous highway, invisible to mortal eyes, had opened in the firmament, and along it descended a whole host of archangels of the Divine Master to receive with the blessings of his glory the courageous workers of his cause.

Under the delirious and deafening applause of the huge throng, the starving lions were released for the frightening scene of mercilessness, terror and blood. But not one of the unknown disciples who were about to die at Nero's depraved feast felt the anguishing torture of such a horrendous death, because the

gentle anesthetic of the divine powers soothed their pain-filled, lacerated hearts in that excruciating moment.

Overcome by the anguish and affliction of their final moments before the bloodthirsty public, those being sacrificed did not have time to gather together in the harrowing arena. The starving beasts seemed overcome by a terrible craving. And while their wretched bodies were being torn to bits, Domitius Nero commanded the dancing troupes and musicians to celebrate the spectacle with the songs and dances of a victorious Rome.

Including the considerable audience that had gathered on the hills, nearly half a million people cheered in deafening and dreadful applause, while two hundred human beings fell, ripped to pieces...

Entering the arena, Livia knelt in front of the Emperor's grand and luxurious pavilion, where she tried to catch a glimpse of her husband's form in the distance for the last time so she could keep that sorrowful last picture deep in her soul along with the image of Jesus crucified, an image that flooded her tormented heart with serene emotions in that supreme moment. She thought she could vaguely discern the erect figure of the senator, crowned with the roses of triumph, and when her lips opened in a last prayer mixed with the burning tears that gushed from her eyes, she suddenly found herself enveloped by the savage paws of a monster. However, she did not feel any violent or harsh shock that usually signals the dark moment of death. She seemed to experience a light jolt, and then felt wrapped in the arms of a translucent mist, which she noticed with great surprise. She tried to get her bearings inside the circus and recognized the noble figure of Simeon at her side as he smiled divinely at her, giving her the silent and sweet certainty that she had crossed over the threshold of eternity.

At that moment, in the Emperor's box of honor, Publius Lentulus felt an indefinable anguish in his heart. In the maelstrom

of that deafening uproar, the senator had never felt such a deep despondency and bitter disenchantment with life. Those dreadful murderous spectacles of terror and death now horrified him. Without being able to explain why, his thought returned to Galilee long ago. It seemed that he was beholding again the gentle form of the Messiah of Nazareth telling him: "All the powers of your empire are very weak and all its riches are paltry!"

Leaning toward his friend Euphanilus Drusus, Publius confessed his painful impressions discreetly:

"My friend, today's spectacle terrifies me! ... I feel an anguish such as I have never felt in my entire life ... Are these really slaves who are going to their final punishment, succumbing to the cruelty of these violent and wild animals?"

"I don't think so," replied Senator Euphanilus, whispering in his ear. "There's a rumor that these wretches are poor inoffensive Christians arrested in the catacombs!"

Without knowing how to explain the reason for his deep repulsion, Publius Lentulus suddenly remembered Livia and anxiously immersed himself in the most painful conjectures.

While all this was happening, we shall return to examine Ana's situation right after her companions had entered the arena of death. Certain that Jesus had reserved the last place for her in the sorrowful moment of her martyrdom, the elderly servant maintained her brave spirit with sincere and ardent prayers. Her eyes, however, did not stray from the figure of Livia – who had withdrawn to a corner of the arena where she had kneeled -- to the moment when she saw the great African lion that had struck the fatal blow to Livia's chest. In that instant, the poor woman felt weakened, faced with the tremendous prospect of her own testimony; but in a trice, before her thoughts took another direction, Aton and another soldier approached her, saying:

"Madam, come with us!"

Noticing that the soldiers were leading her back inside, she protested emphatically:

"Soldiers, there is nothing I want more than to die with the others right now for our faith in Jesus Christ!"

But seeing her headstrong courage, the agent of the Empire grabbed her forcefully by the arm, and taking her to a passageway inside the prison that led to the public street, Aton addressed her almost threateningly:

"Leave, woman! Flee without delay. We do not want complications with your family!"

Having said that, he closed the large gate. Livia's servant now understood everything. In anguish, she immediately concluded that her mistress's clothes had saved her life from this bitter ordeal. Tears streamed down her eyes, a mixture of indescribable mental suffering. In her heart she asked herself why the Lord had not granted her the glorification of the sacrifices of that memorable and dolorous afternoon.

She heard the confusing sound of more than three hundred thousand voices, condensed into resounding shouts of applause, acclaiming the sinister frenzie of the wild animals in their human hunt. Step by step, carrying with her the torturous weight of a wordless agony, she went back to the Aventine villa, which was not far from the shameful circus. She entered, disheartened and silent.

Only a few of the most devoted slaves were watching over the Lentulus residence, as was the custom during the great days of the popular festivities, which most of the servants attended. No one noticed Ana's return and she managed to take off the toga calmly enough. She removed the precious jewels from her clothing, her hands and hair, and kneeling down in the bedroom, she let her sorrowful tears flow freely

along with the bitter prayers she lifted up to Jesus under the weight of her anguishing grief.

She did not know how many endless minutes she remained in that imploring and grief-stricken posture, between ardent supplications and bitter conjectures about her unexpected removal from the torment of the circus, and feeling unworthy to bear witness to the Savior for her deep and sincere faith. Then a distinct sound announced the return of the senator.

It was nearly night time and the first stars were shining in the blue of the beautiful Roman sky.

Entering his home with an uneasy and downcast heart, Publius Lentulus reached the empty foyer with his soul oppressed. He was immediately sought out by his servant Fabius Tulius, who had replaced Comenius many years ago, taken away by death from that position of trust.

As he approached the senator, who had returned alone after dismissing the company of friends with the excuse that his wife was gravely ill, the old servant said with thoughtful respect:

"Sir, your daughter has communicated by messenger that she is continuing to take steps so that you will have news of your wife as soon as possible."

The senator thanked him with a slight nod, underscoring his distressing worries.

In the solitude of her prayers, and when she was certain of her master's return, Ana understood it was her sad duty to inform him of everything that had happened. In a few moments, Fabius approached him again in his rooms to announce that Ana was asking to meet with him in private. The senator immediately attended his elderly house servant, taken by an indefinable surprise.

With her eyes swollen from weeping and her voice frequently interrupted by painful emotions, Ana disclosed all the facts without omitting a single detail of the tragic incident, while the

senator, his eyes wide open in disbelief and terrified astonishment, did everything he could to grasp the dolorous account.

When she finished, cold sweat was running down his tortured face; his temples throbbed terribly.

At first he wanted to crush the humble servant as one would crush a venomous viper, overcome by the initial shock of the rebelliousness of his pride and vanity. He did not want to believe that horrible and grievous confession, but his heart was pounding and his nerves were shattering in piercing agony.

Publius Lentulus felt the most terrible pain of his entire miserable existence. All of his dreams, all of his aspirations and affectionate hopes crumbled forever under the dark tide of these grim realities.

Feeling himself to be the most wretched culprit of the justice of the gods at the very moment when he had planned to express his utmost happiness, he could see nothing before him but the crushing reality of his limitless pain.

Under Ana's emotional gaze as she looked at him in fear, he stood up sternly and without a tear, his eyes gleaming with madness, such was their strange and dolorous stare. As if he were a phantasm of indescribable rebelliousness, pain, vengeance and suffering, and without responding to his contrite servant as she prayed silently to Jesus to calm his anguished sorrows, he took a few robot-like steps toward the wide-open door, through which the gentle and refreshing breezes of the evening entered.

Stumbling with savage pain through the colonnade, he walked resolutely as if he were about to duel with the darkness to defend his slandered and betrayed wife, who had been martyred by the criminals of that shameless court. Unaware that his clothes were in disarray, he strode quickly to the circus where the mob was putting the finishing touches on the merciless passions of their soulless Caesar.

However, a more terrible spectacle met his disturbed eyes in the isolation of his supreme mental anguish.

Drunken with the base instincts of their perverse materiality, the soldiers had placed the sinister remains of the wild animals' monstrous banquet of that unforgettable afternoon on the tops of posts and columns to make improvised torches, which illuminated the entire outside of the enclosure with the macabre fire from fragments of human flesh.

Publius Lentulus felt the full extent of his powerlessness before that supreme demonstration of horror and cruelty. But he went on, stumbling with pain like a drunk or a madman, to the astonishment of those who saw him walking in such a place, looking agape at the sinister torches made from deformed and burning heads.

He was giving free reign to his thoughts, sorrowful with anguish and rebellion, as if his soul were nothing more than a tiger trapped in the skeleton of his aging chest, when he noticed two drunken soldiers fighting over a delicate object, which suddenly caught his attention although he could not explain the reason for his unexpected interest in it.

It was a small pearl necklace with a valuable cameo hanging from it. His eyes fixed on the unknown object and his heart guessed the rest. He had recognized it. That necklace was the wedding present he had given to the woman he idolized, and only now did he remember his wife's affectionate fondness for that cameo, a portrait of himself in his youth, reminding her of the only love of her early years.

He planted himself in front of the contenders, who immediately assumed a posture of respect.

Questioned harshly, one of the humble and trembling soldiers explained:

"Your Excellency, the necklace belonged to one of the women condemned to the wild animals in today's spectacle."

"How much do you want for it?" Publius Lentulus asked, grimly.

"I bought if from a friend for two sestertii."

"Give it to me!" retorted the senator in a threatening and imperative tone.

The soldiers humbly handed over the necklace, and the senator, rummaging through his clothes, took out a heavy bag of gold coins and threw them at the contenders in a gesture of disgust and supreme disdain.

Publius Lentulus left the abominable place, barely containing the tears that were now rising in a torrent from his oppressed and tormented heart.

Clasping the miniscule adornment closely to his chest, a mysterious force seemed to come over him, as if in keeping that last vestige of his wife, he would be forever preserving for himself something of her personality and soul.

Far from the sinister lights that gruesomely illuminated the entire length of the public street, the senator entered a dark alley.

After a few steps, he noticed a gigantic tree rising to the sky in front of him, and poeticizing the entire area with the oldness of its leafy majesty. Stumbling, he leaned against its ancient trunk, yearning for rest and consolation. He gazed up at the stars that tinted the entire Roman firmament with captivating scintillations and remembered that the pure soul of his wife must surely be resting in the sublime peace of heavenly light under the blessing of the gods.

In a spontaneous gesture he kissed the tiny necklace and pressed it delicately to his heart, and reflecting on the arid desert of his life, he wept as he had never wept before in any of the other painful circumstances of his troubled existence.

In a profound look back on his entire bitter past, he saw that all that his noble aspirations had received was the scorn of gods and men. In his wretched pride he had paid the world

the heaviest toll of anguish and grievous tears, and in his male vanity he had received the most painful humiliations of fate. He realized, too late, that Livia had done all she could to make him happy with a life of cheerful, simple and unassuming love. He remembered the smallest occurrences of his pain-filled past as if his soul were carrying out a meticulous autopsy of all his dreams, hopes and illusions in the shadows of time.

As a man, he had lived bound to the processes of the State, which robbed him of the most delightful enjoyments of domestic life; as a husband, he did not have sufficient fortitude to arm himself against insidious slander; as a father, he considered himself the most disgraceful of all. So, what was the crown of triumph worth if it had come to him as an unbearable chalice of anguish? What were his political victories worth now, or the social significance of his titles of nobility, or his weighty fortune under the implacable hand of his merciless fate?

He was lost in his ponderings in a deep abyss of darkness and cruel doubt, when the kind and gentle figure of the prophet of Nazareth arose in his tormented mind with the indestructible wealth of his peace and humility.

In the fullness of his memories, it seemed that he could still hear the extraordinary warnings Jesus had given him in his loving and compassionate voice next to the lapping waters of Lake Tiberias. Recalling Jesus intensely, he felt overcome by a torrent of tears that somehow soothed his aching heart. Kneeling beneath the opulent and bountiful canopy as he had done one day in Palestine, he cried out to heaven, his eyes brimming with tears as he recalled the moral strength that the Christian doctrine had given his wife's heart, spiritually nourishing her to accept all her suffering with dignity and heroism:

"Jesus of Nazareth!" he said in an imploring and grief-filled voice, "I had to lose the best and dearest of all my treasures to

remember the rightness and sweetness of your words! ... I do not yet understand your cross, and I still do not know how to accept your humility within my sincerity as a man, but if you can see the enormity of my afflictions, come and rescue my miserable and unhappy heart once again!"

Grievous tears followed this invocation delivered with blunt, bold and painful sincerity, after which he felt an indefinable and imponderable power now helping him through his anguishing ordeal.

In that unforgettable moment, when the entreaty that flowed from the depths of his lacerated soul had ended, the proud patrician sensed the presence of an inexplicable power changing all of his heart's innermost dispositions. Still on his knees, he saw with the inner vision of his soul that a point of light had begun to appear at his side, increasing prodigiously in the grief-stricken serenity of that painful moment of his life. Publius was surprised at the phenomenon, suggesting the most unexpected explanations in his mind.

The focus of light finally took form, and there in front of him, Publius saw the radiant figure of Flaminius Severus, who had come to speak to him on that stormy night of his infinite bitterness.

Surprised and astonished, Publius recognized him, identifying his facial features and his cordial greetings, just as when he used to address him on earth. His appearance was the same, with his gentle expression of serenity, now touched by a sad and bitter smile. He wore the same purple-hemmed toga, but he no longer had the martial and imposing bearing of his earthly existence. Flaminius contemplated him as if overcome with infinite pity and unending sorrow. The penetrating look of his spirit exposed the most hidden recesses of Publius's conscience, while the senator became calmer, altogether reverent, moved and astonished.

"Publius," said the friendly voice of the spirit affectionately, "do not rebel against the execution of the divine plans, which today have changed the entire script of your life! ... Listen carefully! I speak to you with the same sincerity and love that has united our hearts for many centuries! ... In death, all our vanities disappear ... in its sublime light, our earthly powers are miserably weak! ... Pride, my friend, opens to us a door of thick darkness beyond the grave, where we lose ourselves in our selfishness and impenitence! ... Go to your home and accept the acrid cup of harsh trials with serenity and spiritual bravery, for you are still far from finishing the glass of your purifying sorrows within the realm of redemptive and superlative expiations ... Your great suffering will find no remedy in the world, but it will open a new pathway to you on the eternal horizons of belief! ... Our gods are expressions of a respectable and pure faith, but Jesus of Nazareth is the Way, the Truth and the Life! ... While our illusions about Jupiter lead us to pay homage to the most powerful and the strongest, considered the favorites of our divinities due to the value of their wealthy sacrifices, the precious teachings of the Nazarene Master lead us to ponder the emptiness of our false powers in the world and to embrace the poorest and most unfortunate in order to impel all men towards his Kingdom, won through individual sacrifice and effort, in search of the only real life, which is the life of the Spirit ... I now know that you once lost your sublime opportunity, but in his infinite mercy and love, the Son of the Almighty God is now answering your appeal by allowing my old affection to come and soothe the painful wounds of your tormented heart!"

The senator allowed all his thoughts to become lost in the tempest of the most blessed tears of his life. Heaving with the sobs of regret, he mentally pleaded:

"Yes, my friend and master, I want to understand the truth, and I long for forgiveness for my enormous wrongdoings! ... Flaminius, inspiration of my shattered soul, be my guide in the stormy night of my sad destiny! ... Help me with your consideration and goodness! ... Take me by the hand again and enlighten my heart on the dark pathway! ... What can I do to reach heaven and forget my wrongs?"

As if deeply moved by that appeal, the peaceful vision's eyes were lit with piteous and divine tears.

Unable to understand the workings of that unusual phenomenon, Publius noticed little by little that his friend's silhouette was dissolving slightly in the darkness, withdrawing from the screen of his spiritual contemplation; even so, he saw that his lips were compassionately murmuring one word: "Forgive!"

That gentle order poured into his soul like a soothing balm. He felt that his eyes were now open to the material realities that surrounded him, as if he had awakened from an uplifting dream.

He felt somewhat relieved of his deep pain and stood up to reclaim with decisive courage the sorrowful burden of earthly existence.

He returned home around ten o'clock at night, and found Plinius and Flavia waiting anxiously.

Seeing his deeply downcast and transformed face, his concerned daughter embraced him in a display of unspeakable tenderness, saying in tears:

"Father, dear father, we haven't found out anything yet."

Publius Lentulus, however, silently enfolded his daughter and son-in-law in a forlorn, heavyhearted look.

He steered them into his private office for a family meeting, which he had decided Ana should also attend, to go over the unforgettable events of that day of cruelest trials.

As the senator conveyed to his daughter and son-in-law Ana's painful revelations, which she followed extremely moved, the faces of Flavia and her husband showed the painful emotions arising from the grievous impact of his story.

At the end of the detailed account, Plinius Severus exclaimed with thoughtless pride:

"Shouldn't we place the entire blame on this miserable creature who has served undeservingly for so many years in your house?"

As he said this, the official pointed to the servant, who lowered her head humbly, praying to Jesus to strengthen her soul for the testimony of that moment, which she imagined would be utterly painful to her most tender sentiments.

Publius Lentulus felt inclined to agree with his son-in-law; however, he also felt Flaminius's words still resonating in his consciousness and he replied firmly:

"Children, we mustn't jump to conclusions. Although I realize that Ana was wrong in accepting her mistress's clothing, I wish to venerate Livia's memory in her servant forever. Ana has been a faithful companion for twenty-five years of her heartrending sacrifice and she will continue in this house with the same privileges that were granted to her by her benefactress. I ask only that she keep our doleful secrets of this night to herself, because I want to publicly honor my wife's memory after her great sacrifice at that infamous celebration."

Plinius and Flavia observed in surprise his spontaneous generosity toward the servant while Ana thanked Jesus for the grace of his enlightenment.

The senator seemed profoundly changed by the terrible shock to his spiritual sensibilities.

Plinius Severus intervened, explaining:

"I told several of our friends who were here to greet you that, because we were concerned about my mother, we would not

be commemorating your political triumph today. To justify your absence, I also told them that the senator's wife was gravely ill in Tibur, where she had gone in search of healing. This news was received by our dear friends as being very natural because your wife had not frequented society since your return from Palestine. So it is understandable that all our friends believed her to be ill."

The senator listened to these explanations with interest, as if he had found a solution to the anguishing problem that was oppressing him.

A few minutes later, after examining the possibility of carrying out an idea that was unfolding in his aching mind, he said more animatedly:

"Your idea about this situation, my son, has given me the perspective of a reasonable solution for the grievous question that has been distressing me.

"It is my duty to defend my wife's memory," continued the senator, with moist eyes, "and if it were possible, I would fight the cruel government that currently defiles the best gains of society; but if I were personally to proclaim my indignation and rebellion in the public plaza, I would be branded as a lunatic; and if I were to challenge Domitius Nero, it would be like trying to stop the waters of the Tiber with a flower stem. In this matter, then, I shall work behind the scenes politically in order to overthrow the tyrant and his partisans, even if it costs us the utmost time and patience.

"What I must do right now is offer all the tribute possible to the immaculate sentiments of my companion, carried off in the maelstrom of insanity and cruelty."

Silent and moved, Plinius and Flavia listened to him without interrupting the rapid flow of his words, while he continued judiciously:

"For more than ten years now, Roman society has regarded my poor wife as sickly and demented. And now that our friends

have been advised that Livia is in Tibur, perhaps awaiting her death, I shall go there with Ana before the night is over."

And as if seized by an unshakable idea, with his concern of paying homage to the unforgettable deceased, Publius Lentulus continued:

"Our house in Tibur is empty now because more than twenty days ago Philopator went to Pompeii on my orders ... I will go there with Ana, carrying a funeral urn, which for all intents and purposes will contain the remains of my poor Livia ... Our servants also should leave tomorrow, at which time, as a formality of social life, I will send messengers to Rome informing them of what has happened! ... In Tibur we will offer Livia's memory every tribute, and publicly transfer her ashes back here, where I will observe the solemn public funeral rites, thus testifying, although too late, to my adoration of the holy woman who sacrificed her entire life for us."

"But what about the cremation?" Plinius Severus asked prudently, surmising the possible success of the plan.

The senator did not hesitate to resolve the matter with the usual vigor of his decisions:

"If the rite requires the presence of priests, I will go to the minister of the service in the city and state that it is my wish to do everything within the smallest circle of my closest family.

"All that remains is for you two to keep tonight's dolorous plans completely secret so as to not harm the susceptibility of social prejudice."

Surprised by such fortitude under those painful circumstances, Plinius Severus went with him in the late hours to buy a funeral urn. It was purchased in a few minutes from a merchant who asked nothing of the strange customer due to his social and political status, as well as to the weighty

importance of the purchase, made with significant advantages for his self-interest.

That very night, Publius Lentulus and Ana went with a few slaves to the city where the ancient Romans used to repose, overcoming the thick darkness along the way and arriving with the peace of mind of having offered final homage to Livia's memory.

These measures were accepted with great wonder by all the servants, who did not dare discuss their orders, and also the patricians of the city, who knew that the senator's wife was ill but did not know about the tragic episode of her death.

Flavia and Plinius were called the next day, thus fulfilling all social imperatives in the grievous demonstration of condolences.

A splendid and generous gift from Publius Lentulus to the cult of Jupiter had gained him full authorization of the Tiburtine clergy regarding his decision to cremate his wife's body within the family circle, paying homage to Livia's memory with all the rites of the ancient cult of the gods, invoking the protection of the collective spirits of the manes and household divinities.

Numerous couriers were expedited to Rome and two days later the funeral urn arrived in the Empire's capital, entering the Aventine palace with great pomp, where a superb catafalque[56] awaited it.

Over the next three days the symbolic ashes of Livia were open to visitation by the people. The senator had ordered large donations of food and money to be distributed to the plebeians who came to offer their final tributes to the memory of his beloved deceased wife. Long lines of mourners visited the residence day and night, giving it the imposing aspect of a temple open to all social classes. The entire Roman nobility, including the cruel Emperor, was represented in the pomp of these funeral rites,

[56] A raised and decorated platform on which the coffin of a distinguished person lies in state before or during a funeral. *Encarta Dictionary*. – Tr.

which were an expression of remorse and an attempt at amends on the part of Livia's grieving husband. Publius Lentulus realized that only in this way could he now do penance publicly with regard to his wife, who had come once more to occupy a place of veneration in their family's wide circle of aristocratic friendships.

When the last segment of the ceremonies had ended, the senator insisted that his daughter and son-in-law, as well as Agrippa, come to live with him in the Aventine villa. This was arranged on a temporary basis, according to what Plinius told his wife. That same night, with his soul tormented with longing and anguish, he and Ana moved all of his wife's personal belongings to his private rooms.

With this task accomplished, Publius Lentulus asked the servant with singular interest:

"Is this all of it?

Despite an affirmative answer, he insisted, as if something were still missing. Referring to Simeon's cross, carefully tucked away by Ana as if no one else would appreciate the special meaning of that treasure, he asked:

"Where is that little wooden cross that my wife revered so much?"

"Ah, yes!" exclaimed the servant, happy to see the change in that austere soul.

And retrieving from her room the modest memento from the Samaritan apostle, she handed it to him with loving reverence. The senator stored it in a secret cabinet. However, anyone following his sorrowful life would see him every night, in the solitude of his room, next to the precious symbol of his wife's beliefs.

When the lights of the palace gently went out, and as everyone sought to rest in the silence of the night, the proud patrician would retrieve Simeon's cross from the chest of his dearest mementos, and kneeling as Livia had, he would stop the mechanics of worldly conventionalism to meditate and weep bitterly.

VI
The Dawning of the Kingdom of the Lord

Recalling the painful and moving scene of the deaths of the Christian martyrs in the circus arena, we feel compelled to follow Livia's spirit on its majestic journey to the Kingdom of Jesus.

Never have the horizons of earth been blessed with landscapes as beautiful as those that opened in the spheres closest to the planet at the time of the collective departure of the first apostles of Christianity, exterminated by human impiety in the golden and glorious era of the consoling doctrine of the Nazarene.

On that day, when the voracious beasts tore the defenseless followers of the new ideal to pieces, a whole legion of wise and benevolent spirits, under the aegis of the Divine Master, surrounded their lacerated hearts in martyrdom, imbuing them with strength, resignation and courage for the supreme testimony to their faith.

Above the nefarious passions unleashed in that ignorant and merciless audience, the powers of heaven unfolded the infinite mantle of their mercy, and beyond that sinister and deafening uproar there were voices that spoke blessings, providing the martyrs of the Lord a fount of gentle and encouraging consolation.

It was growing late when the last victims fell to the brutal blows of the furious and implacable lions.

Opening her eyes in the arms of her old, benevolent friend, Livia immediately understood that her anguishing ordeal had ended. Simeon had a divine smile on his lips as he caressed her hair with paternal tenderness. An unfamiliar emotion, however, stirred the liberated soul of the senator's wife, who caught herself shedding sorrowful tears. In anguished surprise she saw the bloody remains of her torn body lying there. In spite of her astonishment, she understood the sweet mystery of the spirit's resurrection that Jesus spoke about in his divine lessons. She wanted to speak so that she could voice her innermost thoughts, but her heart was filled with indefinable emotions. Little by little she noticed that, like her own, other spirits were ascending from the blood-soaked arena in hesitant steps but supported by ethereal creatures, haloed with incomparable grace, such as she had never beheld at any time in her life. The colorful and tumultuous scenario of the ignominious circus disappeared from her sight and the sarcastic and perverse laughter of the merciless spectators no longer resonated in her ears. She saw a merciful and compassionate light flowing from the starry firmament, and it seemed that a new clarity, unknown on earth, had wonderfully appeared in the night. An immense multitude of seemingly-winged beings surrounded everyone, filling the area with divine vibrations.

Dazzled, she saw a radiant pathway forming between the earth and heaven …

In the wake of an indescribable light, which did not obfuscate the tender brightness of the stars embroidering with glitter the soft blue of the firmament, she saw more legions of spirits descending swiftly from the wonderful regions of the infinite.

Enveloped in the delicate sounds of that indescribable environment, her ears heard sublime melodies from the invisible plane, as if, surrounded by lyres and flutes, harps and lutes, divine songbirds of Paradise were singing On High, projecting sidereal bliss onto the dark and sad landscapes of earth.

As if impelled by a mysterious energy, her spirit was able to express her dearest, innermost emotions.

Embracing her benevolent old Samaritan friend, she managed to murmur, bathed in tears:

"Simeon, my benefactor and master, pray with me to Jesus so that this moment will be less painful."

"Yes, my child," replied the venerable apostle, holding her to his heart as if he were holding a babe, "in his infinite mercy, the Lord reserves his love for those who turn to his generosity with the ardent and sincere faith of the heart! ... Quiet your spirit, for you are on your way to the Kingdom of the Lord, which is meant for those hearts who have loved him greatly!"

At that moment, an incomprehensible force seemed to be impelling toward heaven everyone there who no longer possessed the heavy, earthly, material covering.

Livia felt the ground dropping away and her whole being volitating in open space. She was experiencing strange sensations, despite being strongly supported by the kindly arms of her venerable friend.

It was indeed a radiant train of the purest spirits ascending that sparkling pathway traced in light in the midst of the ether!

Experiencing unusual sensations of lightness, the senator's wife felt immersed in an ocean of the gentlest vibrations.

All her companions were smiling, and as she looked at them, carried by divine messengers, she was able to identify one by one those who had been her brothers and sisters in prison, in suffering and in shameless death. At one point, however, as if her memories were called back to all the details of her reality, she remembered Ana: she did not see Ana on that journey of glorification in Jesus Christ.

As soon as this memory came to her, she heard Simeon's voice explaining with his proverbial kindness:

"Daughter, you will understand everything later on ... In your longing, however, always aim toward the divine purpose, inspired by all wisdom and mercy ... Do not be troubled by Ana's absence at this banquet of celestial joy, because it was Jesus' will for her to remain a while longer in the workshop of his blessings, amid the darkness of earthly exile."

Livia listened and silently resigned herself.

She realized that they were continuing along the same wonderful pathway, which seemed to link heaven and earth in a fraternal embrace of light. All the divine members of the caravan were floating upward in open space toward glorious and unknown regions. In the midst of the aerial elements, she was surprised to find she had retained the full mechanism of her physical sensations on the etherized and radiant path.

In the distance, in the depths of space, she seemed to behold new starry firmaments that multiplied wonderfully in the midst of the infinite, and she saw resplendent radiations that at times dazzled her astonished eyes.

Other times, looking back furtively, she could see a group of compact moving shadows, where the spheres of life on the distant earth were located.

On both sides of the path she could see dainty, fragrant flowers, like the lilies on earth, but more delicate, as if transported to the gardens of Paradise.

Eternity presented itself with indescribable enchantment and happiness!

As he joyfully recalled the painful agonies of life on earth, Simeon was speaking lovingly about adaptation to the new life and the sublime beauties of Jesus' kingdom, when in Livia's ears echoed the silvery, harmonious voices of astral nightingales celebrating On High the redemption of the martyrs of Christianity. It was as if they were arriving at the outskirts of a new Galilee, drenched with delightful melodies and fragrances and lifted up to the full light of the Infinite, as if it were a nest of sanctified and pure souls swaying to the fragrant breezes of eternal spring on the wonderful and endless tree of creation.

That sweet, clear hymn would at times rise to heaven in marvelous sounds like subtle incense from souls seeking the throne of the Everlasting in hosannas of love, joy and appreciation, whereas at other times it would descend in enrapturing melodies toward the darkness of earth as a shout of faith and hope in Jesus Christ to awaken the most perverse and hardened hearts in the world.

Human language cannot faithfully translate the harmonious vibrations of the melodies of the invisible, but a taste of that glorious hymn should be remembered by us as a gentle reminiscence of Paradise:

"Glory to you, Lord of the Universe, Creator of all wonders!

"It is through Your inaccessible wisdom that the constellations light up the depths of the infinite and it is through Your goodness that the tender herbs grow on the dark crust of the earth!

"Through Your inestimable grandeur and Your merciful justice, time opens Your unlimited treasures to all souls!

"Through Your sacrosanct and sublime love, all laughter and tears bloom in peoples' hearts!

"Lord of the Universe, bless the sacred hopes of this Kingdom. Jesus is for us Your Word of love, peace, charity and beauty! ... Strengthen our longing to work in Your holy harvest!

"Multiply our energies and make the sacred fire of faith rain down upon us to sow in the earth the divine seeds of the love of Your Son!

"One drop of the divine dew of Your mercy is enough to purify all hearts immersed in the mire of crime and earthly impenitence, and a single ray of Your power is enough for all souls to convert to the supreme good!

"And now, O Jesus, Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, receive our ardent and fervent prayers!

"O Divine Master, bless those who arrive redeemed by the creative breath of your most sacred blessings!

"Victims of human perversity, all your missionaries have bravely fulfilled the duties that bound them to painful exile!

"The world, in the maelstrom of its unrest and iniquity, did not understand their most devoted hearts, but in your goodness and mercy, open the divine doors of your kingdom of light to these martyrs of truth."

Stanzas of profound beauty spread blessings of peace and harmonious joy across the bright and sublime paths of the universal ether!

Lower beings from the spirit realms closest to the planet received those sacrosanct exhalations from the celestial banquet reserved by Jesus for the martyrs of his doctrine of redemption, as if they too had been invited by the mercy of the Divine Master. Many of them received those wonderful vibrations in their hearts and were converted forever to supreme love and goodness.

The sweetest harmonies saturated every spirit plane, pouring out magnificent light over the earth.

In that region of unknown and prodigious beauty – unexplainable in poor human language – Livia renewed her moral strength after the rigorous fulfillment of her divine mission.

There she understood the full meaning of the concept "many mansions" from Jesus's teachings, observing with Simeon the most diverse spheres of labor located in the environs of the earth, or studying the grandeur of the worlds disseminated by the divine wisdom in the immeasurable ocean of ether in immortality. Obeying the tendencies of her heart, in the spirit world she did not forget her former friends still in the terrestrial zones.

After a few days of gentle and loving emotions, all the spirits gathered in that luminous landscape prepared to receive a visit from the Lord, just as his divine presence used to be felt in the bucolic setting of Galilee.

On a day of rare and indescribable beauty in which a clearness of divine colors poured a blissful joy into every heart, the Lamb of God came down from the higher sphere of his sublime glories. Taking up the word in that circle of wonders, he recalled his unforgettable preaching next to the tranquil waters of the Sea of Galilee. There is no way for the new beauty of his eternal words, the substance of all love, all truth and all life to be faithfully translated on earth; even so, in this account it is our duty to remember his unlimited wisdom and dare to reproduce, imperfectly and quickly, the essence of his divine lesson in that unforgettable moment.

To everyone present it seemed to be a faithful reproduction of the graceful and clear scenes by Lake Tiberias. The Master's words poured into the sanctuary of their souls with deep and mysterious resonances while the same vibration of mercy and serene majesty emanated from his eyes.

"Come to me, all you who have sown tears and blood in the vineyard of my kingdom of love and truth!

"In the infinite dwellings of my Father, there is enough light to dissipate all darkness, console all suffering and redeem all sins.

"Be glorified, therefore, in the wisdom and love of Almighty God, you who have shaken the dust off the wretched sandals of the flesh in the purifying sacrifices of earth! A sublime, eternal peace awaits you in the wide and endless kingdom promised by the divine hallelujahs of the Good Tidings because you nourished no other longing in the world than to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

"Between the manger and Calvary, I traced out the eternal and luminous path for my sheep ... the Gospel flourishes now like the immortal and unquenchable harvest of divine blessings. But we must not rest, my beloved, because the time will come on earth when all your lessons shall be trampled upon and forgotten ... After a long period of sacrifice to be consolidated in every soul, the doctrine of redemption will be called to enlighten the transitory governments of people; but pride and ambition, despotism and cruelty are bound to revive the nefarious abuses of their freedom! The old cult, with its pompous ruins, will try to restore the abominable temples of the golden calf. Religious prejudices, clerical castes and false priests will once again establish the commerce of sacred things, offending the love and wisdom of our Father, who calms the tiny wave in the forsaken sea just as he wipes away people's most secret tears, shed in the silence of their prayers or in the painful calm of their unspeakable bitterness!

"By burying the Gospel in the abomination of sacred places, religious abuses cannot hide the light of my truths and steal them from the hearts of people of good will!

"When this eclipse of the evolution of my teachings occurs, even then I will not cease to deeply love my flock of sheep that have strayed from the fold!

"From the spheres of light that dominate all the circles of earthly activities, I will walk with my rebellious wards as I did before among the merciless and hardened hearts of Israel, which I once chose as a messenger of the divine truths among the straggling tribes of the immense human family!

"In the name of Almighty God, my Father and your Father, I rejoice to be here with you for the spiritual rewards you have achieved in my kingdom of peace with your blessed sacrifices and purifying self-denials! Many missionaries of my doctrine will continue to fall lifeless in the ruthless arena, but they will form an apostolic caravan with you that will never end, supporting all the workers who persevere to the end on the long road to the salvation of souls!

"When darkness increases in hearts on earth, and they decide to use all human progress for extermination, misery and death, I will pour out my light on all flesh, and all those who resonate with my kingdom and confide in my promises will hear our voices and sanctifying appeals!

"Through the wisdom and truth found in the gentle revelations of the Consoler, my word will be manifested once again in the world to people who are bewildered on their arduous pathway, through your examples that will be perpetuated throughout the endless pages of centuries still to come!

"Yes, my beloved! For the day will come when all human lies must be confounded by the light of revelations from heaven. A powerful breath of truth and life will sweep across the entire earth, which will then pay the heaviest tributes of suffering and blood for the evolution of its institutions ... Exhausted from receiving the venomous fluids of the infamy and iniquity of its inhabitants, the planet itself will protest against the impenitence of its inhabitants, ripping open its entrails in dolorous cataclysms ... Earthly impieties will form heavy clouds

of suffering which, at the right time, will break out into tempests of tears on the dark face of the earth. Then, from the light of my mercy, I will contemplate my unfortunate flock and I will say, like my emissaries: 'Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem!'

"But our Father, who is the sacred expression of all love and wisdom, does not want a single one of His creatures to be lost on the dark paths of impiety!

"We will labor with love in the workshop of the coming centuries; we will reorganize all of the destroyed elements; we will slowly examine all the ruins, seeking materials that can be used again; and when the earthly institutions readjust their existences in fraternity and the good, in peace and justice, after the natural selection of the spirits and within the renewing convulsions of planetary life, we will organize a new evolutionary cycle for the world, consolidating with the divine truths of the Consoler the definitive progress of spiritual humanity."

The Master's voice seemed to fill the extent of infinity itself, as if he were projecting it like a divine beacon of his love into the endlessness of space and time, into the radiant bosom of eternity.

Finishing the exposition of his august prophecies, his sublime form rose to the heavens while an ocean of bluish light, mixed with the sounds of divine and incomparable melodies, saturated those spiritual domains with the caressing hues of earthly sapphires.

Kneeling in their sweet emotions, all those present wept with recognition and joy, filled with holy courage for the elevated tasks they would be called to perform throughout the unending course of the centuries. Wonderful flowers of a celestial blue rained down from On High over every head, dissolving like fluidic lilies of a fragrant mist once they touched the delicate substances that formed the ground of that landscape of supreme harmony.

Livia wept with indescribable emotion while Simeon benevolently instructed her about the new missions of holy work that awaited her dedication on the spirit plane.

"My friend," she said through her tears, "earthly agonies are a poor price to pay for these radiant and immortal rewards! ... If all people had direct knowledge of such happiness, they would have no other concern but to seek the glorious kingdom of God and his righteousness."

"Yes, my child," added Simeon, his eyes resting serenely on the visions of the future, "one day, all beings on earth will come to know the Gospel of the Master and observe his teachings! ... That is why we must sacrifice ourselves for the Lamb of God as many times as necessary. We will organize advanced work posts amid the earthly darkness; we will attempt to awaken all hearts asleep in painful reincarnations to the sublime harmonies of these divine dawnings!

"If necessary, we will return to the world once more on sanctifying missions of peace and truth ... We will succumb to the infamous cross, or we will give our blood as a repast to the wild beasts of ambition and pride, of hatred and cruelty, dormant in the souls of our companions living on earth, and convert all hearts to the love of Jesus Christ!"

Livia then noticed a graceful group of angelic beings distributing the graces of the Lord in that flowery landscape of infinity that was set up in heaven as a resting station. They were rewarding those who had left their earthly anguishes after fulfilling their divine mission.

All those who had attained celestial victory through their efforts in holy martyrdom were now renewing their moral strength and wanted to learn about the new spheres of spiritual bliss, the new expression of life in other realms, to receive new knowledge in the radiant and sublime temples of eternity, and, at the same time, to reestablish their emotional balance.

Under the magnanimity of Jesus' messengers, sublime plans were conceived; new scenarios, new study workshops, new emotions in the reencounter of unforgettable affections that had preceded the Lord's missionaries through the dark and cold night of death.

But when the time came to express to Jesus' emissary her most secret desires, the senator's noble companion examined her deepest sentiments and then replied in tears:

"Messenger of the good, the marvels of the Lord's kingdom would have a new beauty for me if I could enter their sublimity in the company of the heart that is half of my own, my twin soul, whom the wisdom of God in his profound and sweet mysteries destined to be with me since the dawn of time!

"I do not want to belittle the sublime glory of these regions of unspeakable happiness and peace, but in the midst of all the joy around me, I feel a longing for the soul that is the complement of my life!

"Grant me the grace to return to the darkness of earth to uplift the companion of my destiny from the mire of merciless pride and vanity! ... Allow me to protect him in spirit so that one day I may bring him to Jesus' feet, so that he too may receive his divine blessings!"

The angelic spirit smiled with profound understanding and tender affability, saying:

"Yes, love is a bond of eternal light that unites all worlds and all beings of boundless space; without it, the infinite creation itself would have no reason to exist because God is its supreme expression ... The dazzling perspectives of these happy spheres would lose their divine beauty if we did not cherish the hope of participating some day in their unlimited happiness together with our loved ones who find themselves on earth or in other circles of trial in the universe."

And focusing his lucid gaze on Livia's serene and luminous eyes, he continued as if penetrating her most secret and deepest thoughts:

"I know your entire history and I know your incessant and redeeming struggles in past incarnations, which justify your purpose to continue to work in spirit on earth for the spiritual growth of those you have loved so much!

"Moreover, because of his great love for humanity, the Lamb of God did not disdain humiliation, martyrdom, and sacrifice...

"Go, my daughter. You are permitted to work freely among the radiant legions that operate on the dark face of the earth. You will come back here when in need of new enlightenment and new energies. You can return with Simeon as soon as you wish. Do support your unfortunate companion during the long course of his harsh and bitter expiations, especially because Publius Lentulus is not far from the most grievous trial of his current existence, unfortunately lost to his excessive pride and his cold and merciless vanity!"

Livia felt an indefinable emotion at that painful revelation, but expressed all her appreciation for the divine mercy in her sensitive and loving heart.

That same day, the benevolent woman went with Simeon back to the earth, temporarily leaving those splendorous domains.

During her sublime and dizzyingly fast spiritual excursion, she observed the same enchanting and dazzling views on the way while she listened enrapt to the higher teachings of her venerable friend from Samaria.

Soon they neared a wide dark spot.

Already in the earth's atmosphere, Livia felt the strange difference in the environment and experienced the most painful fluidic shocks.

In an instant, she realized they were in the same Rome of her childhood, her youth and her bitter trials.

It was midnight. The entire hemisphere was immersed in the depths of darkness.

Supported by Simeon's arms and his experience, she arrived at her former Aventine villa and recognized the precious marbles.

Going inside, Livia and Simeon went immediately to the senator's dimly lit room.

With the exception of the streets, with the noisy movements of the slaves in their nightly transportation work in accordance to the customs of the times, the whole city was resting in darkness.

As was his habit now, Publius Lentulus was on his knees before Simeon's relic, meditating. His thought descended to the gloomy depths of the past, where he sought in anguish to relive the unforgettable affections that had preceded him on the sad paths of death. It had been more than a month since his wife had crossed over into the mysteries of the tomb under tragic circumstances.

Immersed in the darkness of his exile of bitter and profound longing, the proud patrician calmed himself from the painful turmoil of the day in order to better ponder the mysteries of being, suffering, and destiny ... At one point, when his sorrow and melancholy were at their deepest, he noticed through the veil of his tears that the little wooden cross was sending out delicate threads of silvery light, as if bathed in merciful and tender moonlight.

Absorbed in the heavy and dark vibrations of the flesh, Publius Lentulus did not see the noble silhouette of his wife standing there next to the venerable apostle from Samaria, rejoicing in the Lord upon seeing the profound and favorable spiritual changes in her twin soul in the repetitive pilgrimage of earthly incarnations. Overcome with joy and appreciation

of Divine Providence, Livia kissed his forehead in a gesture of unspeakable tenderness while Simeon offered a prayer of love and thanks to heaven.

The senator did note perceive directly their gentle and luminous presence, but deep within his soul he felt touched by a new strength while his broken heart was enveloped in the caressing light of an ineffable consolation he had never known before.

VII
Webs of Adversity

It seemed that the year 58 had been destined to mark the most painful experiences in the life of Senator Lentulus and his family.

Calpurnia's death and Livia's unexpected passing were sorrowful events that burdened the house with a continuous struggle, forcing Plinius Severus to stay closer to home and to take a break from his youthful follies in order to live in relative calm with his wife.

Aurelia, however, in the impetuosity of her pretensions, never rested. As part of an old scheme of her sickly mind, she began to carry out a sinister plan to slowly poison her reserved and hapless rival by introducing a cunning maid servant into Flavia's household.

At first, the senator's daughter noticed some skin eruptions. Considered to be insignificant, they were treated only with a bread paste mixed with donkey milk, a medication thought at the time to be one of the most effective skin treatments. She

complained incessantly, however, of general weakness and felt completely worn-out.

As for Plinius, returning to the normalcy of public life and giving in once again to Aurelia's intemperate love was only a matter of days. He went back to his ostentatious life with his lover, his sentiments greatly aggravated by Saul's slanderous accusations of Agrippa's love affair with his wife.

Although generous, Plinius Severus was also impulsive, behaving like the domestic tyrants who do not tolerate the slightest shortcomings within their family sanctuary, but who carry out the most intemperate and incomprehensible conduct in public. In spite of his own wrong and condemnable behavior, he began constantly watching his brother and wife with the ferocious impetuosity of an offended lion.

For his part, Saul of Gioras was piqued by the noble and fraternal affection between Flavia and Agrippa and missed no opportunity to poison the official's impulsive heart by conveying the most sordid and unjustifiable slander.

In his generosity and affability, Agrippa could not imagine the snare that was entangling him in his day-to-day life, and he continued bestowing his attention and friendship on the woman who could offer him only the love of a close friendship.

Nevertheless, the Severus's ex-slave did not lose hope. Paying frequent visits to old Araxes, who had become greedier and more ambitious as the years went by, Saul waited anxiously for the moment to realize his impassioned yearning.

Noticing that Flavia Lentulia showed a deep affection for Agrippa, he did not hesitate to see proof of a deep and requited love in her smallest gestures, and therefore did everything he could to worm his way in and capture her interest and attention for himself.

One night, after more than two months of anxiously hoping to achieve his contemptible ends, he managed to

approach the young woman when she was alone, resting on a large divan on the spacious terrace.

From up there, the most beautiful panoramas of the city could be seen, lit by the brightness of the first stars in the gentle, languid twilight. The caressing breezes of the tranquil evening carried the palpable sounds of lutes and harps played in the surroundings, like harmonious voices coming through the immense bosom of the night.

Saul watched the woman he coveted, noticing her lovely and delicate face, her snow-white paleness, stricken by a sickly and inexplicable lassitude. That creature represented the object of all his desperate and crude desires, the goal of his impossible and impetuous happiness. In the materiality of his sentiments, he could not love her as a sister but only with the baseness of his impure desires.

"Madam," he said resolutely, after gazing at her face at length, "I have been waiting many years for a moment like this to confess my enormous love for you. I want you more than anything, more than my own life! I know that you are on a level that is inaccessible to me, but what can I do if I cannot overcome my adoration, my soul's intense love?"

Flavia opened her serene, sad eyes wide, taken by painful surprise.

"Mr. Gioras," she replied courageously, overcoming her emotions, "compose yourself ... If you hold such deep affection for me, let me continue on the pathway of my duties, where every woman who values her virtue and name must remain! Silence your emotions, because the love you confess can be nothing more than an impetuous and impure desire!"

"Impossible, Madam!" said the freedman in desperation. "I have already done everything I could to forget you ... I have done everything I could to remove myself for good ever since that ill-

fated day I saw you for the first time! ... I went back to Massilia and vowed never to return, but the longer I was away from you, the more my soul was filled with boredom and bitterness! So I settled here again, where I have lived in my misfortune and sad hopes! ... I have waited patiently for more than ten years. I have always respected your unquestionable virtue, waiting for the day that you would tire of the unfaithful husband that destiny mercilessly placed on your path!

"Now I suspect that you have emptied the cup of your domestic bitterness, because you have not hesitated to yield to Agrippa's affections ... Ever since I saw you in the company of a man who is not your husband, I have trembled with jealousy because I feel that you were made only for me ... I burn with ardor, and every night I dream deeply about your love and the sweet tenderness of your words, which fill my soul completely as if all the happiness of my life depended on you alone!

"Answer the pleas of my undying love! Do not make me wait any longer, because I may die!"

Flavia Lentulia listened to him both surprised and horrified. She wanted to stand up but she lacked the strength. Even so, she had the courage to answer:

"You are mistaken! Between me and Agrippa there is only the sanctified and pure love of a brother and sister who sympathize with each other in life's trials and struggles.

"I cannot believe your cruel insinuations about my husband's private life, because no matter what conduct he has chosen, I must be the sentinel of his home and the honor of his name.

"If you can understand the respect due a woman, leave me now because I find your proposals of betrayal profoundly repugnant!"

"Leave you? Never!" exclaimed Saul in a terrible tone of voice. "Wait for so many years and get nothing? Never! Never!"

He stepped toward the defenseless woman, who had arisen with supreme effort, and embraced her with impassioned and burning desire, holding her in his impulsive arms for a brief moment.

However, despite his excitement and terrible impetuosity, Saul could not counter the superhuman effort with which the poor woman defended herself in that painful ordeal for her sensitive soul, and his victim unexpectedly escaped from his criminal hands. Flavia immediately sought refuge in her room, shedding tears over her offended dignity but avoiding drawing any scandalous attention to the incident.

Only the next night did Plinius Severus return home to find his wife downcast and dismayed.

When she expressed her disapproval of his absence from their conjugal intimacy, her unfaithful husband replied curtly:

"Yet another jealous scene? You know good and well that that won't work!"

"Plinius, my dear," she explained through her tears, "It has nothing to do with jealousy, but the righteous defense of our home!"

The unfortunate woman briefly told him what had happened. Plinius, however, smiled in disbelief and replied with certain indifference:

"If this story is yet another one of your jealous schemes to keep me tied to the banality of home life, you can save your strength because Saul is my best friend. Just yesterday, when he found out that I was having serious financial problems and couldn't pay off some debts, he lent me eight hundred thousand sestertii. Maybe it would be better if you would value the honor of our name more highly and drop your relationship with Agrippa. Your affair with him has already been talked about too much for me to have any doubts about it!"

Having said that, he returned to the pleasures of the night life, while his wife, abandoned, misunderstood

and hopeless, continued to suffer her unspeakable moral martyrdom in silence.

Several days went by slowly, bitterly, painfully.

Because of her natural reserve as a woman, Flavia did not have the courage to confide her enormous distress to her father, himself already so stricken by life's blows.

Agrippa noticed her despondency and tried to comfort her with kind words, looking for perspectives of better days to come. But the poor woman was wasting away in front of his eyes, under the control of an inexplicable illness that dominated her centers of strength, and under the inner torture of her distressing secrets.

Saul of Gioras, as if all his instincts had been incited by that moment when he held the woman of his impulsive desires in his impetuous arms, swore that he would possess her at any cost, harboring the most terrible plans for vengeance against Flaminius's older son. With that sole purpose in mind, he continued to frequent the Aventine palace, motivated by the most sinister intentions.

Respecting the old traditions of the Severus family, who always made it a point to offer the freedman preferred treatment as an intimate friend, Publius Lentulus, in spite of the little sympathy Saul inspired in him, gave him the utmost freedom in his house without the slightest suspicion of his condemnable plans. At this point, Saul did not try to be around the family, nor did he try to meet Plinius's wife or her father face-to-face. Instead, he remained in the company of the household servants or stayed in the private rooms of Agrippa or his brother, who had never denied him their sincerest trust.

From his place in the shadows, however, he tried to keep an eye on the slightest gestures of Plinius's older brother, who, in light of Flavia's condition, would often spend hours on end in her private rooms in the company of the aging senator.

Sometimes he would encourage her sad hopes of a future with his brother; sometimes he would acquaint her with the latest poetry; sometimes they would chat fraternally about the enchanting trifles of the city's social life.

But every day, Saul, now a fierce adversary, would seek out Flavia's husband to update him with unjustifiable and implausible details about his wife's private life.

Plinius Severus believed his false friend's fabricated accounts completely, resulting in his increasing dedication to Aurelia. She excited him, blinded as he was by the vilest temptations of material life.

Poisoned by Saul's repeated criminal intrigues, Plinius sought a leave of absence to take a trip to Gaul with his lover in order to satisfy the capricious desires she had been manifesting for some time.

On the day of his departure for Massilia, from where he planned to journey to the interior of the province, Saul came looking for him at Aurelia's house, which was close to the Forum, and in feverish hatred he heard the most outrageous slander, which ended with this treacherous suggestion:

"If you want to see Agrippa's and your wife's betrayal for yourself, return unseen to your house tonight and go into your room unannounced. Then you will no longer need the zeal of my dedication as your friend, because you will find your brother in the most compromising situation."

At the time, Plinius Severus was making final preparations for his trip, having already bid farewell to his closest family members. To justify the imperatives for his absence, he had alleged express orders from the leadership of his military activities, although the real and unconfessable motives for his departure were quite different.

However, when he heard the Jewish freedman's accusations, Plinius prepared himself to confront any

eventuality as he headed toward the Aventine palace with his soul tormented by raging emotions.

The ex-slave planned to carry out his criminal scheme based on his merciless and terrible intentions, and took his post late at night with the natural complicity of the household servants in Agrippa's private rooms. He proceeded in a way that the slaves themselves did not know he was there.

Plinius Severus arrived at the house unexpectedly, surprising some of the servants who knew he had already said his farewells. Without saying a word and blinded by the injurious slander of his false friend, he cautiously entered his wife's private room. He could hear the casual tone of his brother's voice, although he could not make out what he was saying.

Opening the silky and delicate curtain a little, he saw Agrippa in a gesture of intimate and fraternal affection, caressing Flavia's hands with a sweet, light smile.

Plinius anxiously observed their slightest gestures for a long time, taken by their mutual demonstration of gentle fraternal esteem, which to his hatred and jealousy-blinded eyes were the most blatant indications of deceitfulness and adultery.

At the peak of his desperation, he opened the curtains abruptly and entered the conjugal room like an enraged tiger.

"Degenerates!" he exclaimed emphatically in a low but forceful voice, trying to avoid the scandalous interference of the servants. "So, this is how you show respect for the dignity of our name?"

Flavia Lentulia, her physical pain having increased greatly, turned white as a sheet, while Agrippa faced his brother's terrible gaze in extreme astonishment.

"Plinius, what right do you have to insult me like this?" he asked sternly. "Let's leave this room immediately. We can discuss your hurtful insinuations in my room. There is a

poor, sickly woman here, abandoned by her husband, who humiliates her name and sensitivities with the vileness of his criminal and unjustifiable conduct, a woman who needs our support and respect!"

Plinius Severus's eyes flashed with hatred while his brother calmly got up and headed for his private quarters. Plinius followed, trembling with rage, aggravated by the humiliation his adversary's superior composure inflicted upon him.

As they reached Agrippa's rooms, the impulsive official, after numerous accusations and reprimands, continued in the same tone:

"OK! Explain yourself, traitor! ... So, after throwing the mud of your shamelessness on my name, you hide behind your unexplainable calm?!"

"Plinius," said Agrippa serenely, obliging his listener to be silent for a few moments, "it's time for you to put an end to your follies. How can you prove such slander against me? You know I've always wanted the best for you. Any degrading comment about your wife's behavior is an unpardonable crime. I'm speaking to you at this grave moment in our destinies, invoking the irreproachable memory of our parents and our past of sincerity and brotherly trust."

The impetuous official froze like a wounded lion as he listened to such commendable and calm statements, while Agrippa continued to express his innermost and sincere feelings:

"And now," he continued calmly, "since you are claiming a right that you have never cultivated – considering the interminable succession of your societal follies – I must tell you that I have loved your wife more than anything else in my entire life! ... In those days when you were wasting your youth on Aurelia's turbulent soul, we saw Flavia for the first time right after she got back from Palestine. I discovered in her eyes

the loving and tender light that I hoped would illuminate the peacefulness of the home that I dreamed of in those days long past! ... But you discovered that light at the same time, and I didn't hesitate to acknowledge your rights once it became clear that she had the same feelings for you. It seemed to me that she was united to you through indefinable ties of a holy mystery! ... Flavia loved you as much as always, and all I could do was forget and try to hide my tortured anguish!

"When you got married, I couldn't bear seeing her leave in your arms, so after hearing my mother's loving and kind counsel, I went in search of other lands with a broken heart! For ten bitter and unhappy years I wandered between Massilia and our property in Avenius, involved in wild and senseless adventures. I could never again cherish the ideal of building a family, for I was constantly tormented by the memories of my silent and irreversible misfortune.

"Finally, I returned to Rome with the last remainders of my dolorous and unlucky illusion.

"I found you in the abyss of illicit relations, but refrained from reproaching you for your unjustifiable conduct.

"I know that you have spent three fourths of our assets to satisfy the insane extravagance of your wretched and degrading adventures, but I haven't criticized your absurd behavior.

"And here, in this house, under this roof that constitutes the affectionate continuation of our paternal home, I've been nothing more to your wife than a dedicated brother and friend!"

Finding himself rightly accused of his wrongs and feeling wounded in his male vanity, Plinius Severus reacted with even more ferocity, overtly enraged in his desperation:

"You bastard, it's useless for you to feign this unbelievable superiority! We're the same; we have the same sentiments, and I don't buy your impartial dedication in this house. You've been

carrying on with Flavia for quite some time now. We shall settle this matter with the sword because one of us must die!"

And pulling out the weapon with which he was armed for any eventuality, he advanced resolutely toward his brother, who crossed his arms serenely as he awaited the deadly blow.

"So, where is your self-respect as a man?" shouted Plinius, exasperated. "Such composure shows your cowardice very well ... Defend your life, because when two brothers fight over the same woman, one of them must die!"

Agrippa Severus smiled sadly, replying:

"Well, what are you waiting for? You will be offering me the supreme blessing of the grave. My life with its never-ending torments has been nothing more than a long, hard path towards death."

Recognizing Agrippa's heroic integrity but still convinced of his wife's infidelity, Plinius sheathed his sword, conceding:

"Fine! I could kill you, but I won't because of our parents' cherished memory. Even so, I still believe in your infamy; thus, I will leave this house forever, carrying in my heart the certainty that in your treacherous soul I have my worst enemy."

Without another word, Plinius walked resolutely away. His brother followed him to the door, making a final loving plea for him not to go.

Someone else had been watching the entire scene in all its details. Saul of Gioras suddenly emerged from his hiding place, snuffed out the light and reached Agrippa with a well-aimed jump from behind, dealing him a fatal blow. The poor man fell backward in a huge pool of blood without uttering a sound. With affected calm, the freedman fled right after his criminal act, with no one suspecting the tragic incident.

In her room, Flavia Lentulia puzzled over the delay in solving a matter in which she was involved, but which she also considered at first glance to be of little importance.

Getting up with considerable effort, she went to the door that connected Agrippa's rooms to the peristilium. Surprised at the darkness and silence, she heard only a slight sound coming from inside, similar to the hoarse sounds of labored and muffled breathing.

Overcome by distressing forebodings, the poor woman felt her heart beating wildly.

The absence of light, that sound of gurgling breathing, and above all the profound and frightening silence, made her retreat in search of Ana's help and experience. The humble servant had won over her heart with her dedication and humility during the bitter days of that period in her life.

Enjoying everyone's respect and esteem, Livia's elderly maid was now practically the governess of the house. By her masters' determination, all the women slaves in the Aventine palace were under her orders.

Called by Flavia to her private chambers, the old servant of the Lentulus family listened to her mistress's hurried confidence, and sharing her fears, she followed her to Agrippa's room. She stopped pensively at the door; the labored breathing was no longer heard.

"Ma'am," she said caringly, "you are weak and still need rest. Go on back to your room. If there is anything to justify your fears, I will notify your father in his private office."

"Thank you, Ana," replied Flavia, visibly shaken. "I agree, but I will wait for the results of your search here in the peristilium."

With a prayer, the elderly maid entered the room, letting in a small amount of light. She stopped, horrified.

Face down on the carpet, Agrippa Severus's body lay in a pool of blood still flowing from the deep wound opened by Saul's murderous weapon.

Ana had to call on all the calm reserves of her faith not to scream in shock, waking up the whole house. Due to the many

sufferings she had borne throughout her life, it was not too hard to add another anguishing note to the concert of her sorrows, which she always endured with resignation and serenity.

Unable to hide her anguish and deep pallor, she returned to the peristilium, saying somewhat uneasily to Flavia Lentulia, who was anxiously watching her slightest gestures:

"Ma'am, don't be alarmed, but Agrippa has been wounded."

At the first signs of Flavia's anguished look as she remembered her husband's profound desperation moments earlier, Ana tried to calm her down:

"There's no time to lose! The first thing we need to do is find the senator. I think it would be better if I did that myself. I would suggest that you go back to the peace and quiet of your room."

However, both of them quickly headed silently for Publius's office, where he was absorbed in numerous political matters in the serenity of the night.

"Agrippa, wounded?!" asked the senator, greatly alarmed, after Ana had told him what had happened. "But who could be the perpetrator of such an attack in this house?"

"Father," replied Flavia through her tears, "Plinius and Agrippa had a serious altercation in my room a little while ago!"

Publius Lentulus sensed the danger conveyed by his daughter's words, but since he could not believe that Flaminius's mutually caring sons would go to the extreme of brandishing weapons against each other, he emphasized decisively:

"Flavia, I can't believe that Plinius and Agrippa would dare to go to such extremes."

Regardless of how highly he now regarded Ana personally, he still could not change the structure of his rigid family traditions. Mindful of her presence, he added, as if wanting to warn his daughter of any uncomfortable revelations that could involve their name in irremediable social scandals:

"Besides, you seem to have forgotten that Plinius said his goodbyes this morning to leave for Massilia. We mustn't forget this. Has anyone seen any strangers in the house?"

"Sir," replied Ana humbly, "I saw Saul hurrying from Agrippa's room a few minutes ago. According to what I saw, and knowing his familiarity with your friends, I think he is the person to ask."

The old senator's eyes flashed strangely, as if he had found the key to the puzzle.

As he was quickly arranging his papers to go and administer first aid to the wounded man, Flavia Lentulia, compelled by Ana's remarks, broke into sobbing:

"Father, I just now remembered something very serious I should have told you about before!"

"Dear child," he said decisively, "you are ill and tired. Go rest in your room. I'll try to take care of everything! ... It's too late to ponder the situation. Heinous matters are always evil, and the evil that is not cut out at the root with the right clarification turns into a seed of calamity in our hearts, bursting forth in tears and bitterness at unexpected times in life! ... We'll talk later. For now, we must do what is most urgent and necessary."

Leaving hurriedly with the servant for the young man's rooms, he saw that Flavia was returning to her room, following his orders without any resistance.

As he entered Agrippa's room with the elderly servant, Publius Lentulus took in the entire extent of the tragedy that had unfolded under his respectable roof.

Closing the door, the senator realized that the elder son of his unforgettable Flaminius was dead. There was nothing else to do but find out the details of that painful drama, whose bloody end was right in front of his eyes.

Kneeling beside the body with his loyal servant, he said poignantly:

"It's too late, Ana! ... My poor Agrippa is dead. There's nothing we could do for a wound like this! ... It seems he died a few minutes ago!"

Lifting his tear-filled eyes to the heavens, he exclaimed bitterly:

"O manes of my unfortunate son, receive our supplications for the perpetual rest of his soul!"

But the prayer died in his heart. His voice had become weak and abject. That heinous spectacle had shaken him deeply. He wanted to speak but could not, his throat torn and unresponsive, gripped by a sorrow that cut deeply into his spiritual resilience.

Ana watched him, she herself afflicted because she had never seen him display such inner emotions during her long service in that house. To her, Publius Lentulus had always been a cold and merciless man, with a heart of iron that beat only for the inane vanities of this world.

At that moment, though, both frightened and moved, she saw that the senator could weep too. Burning tears were falling from his ever-proud eyes, washing silently and sadly over the motionless head of the young man he considered a son, as if nothing else was left for him in his anguishing doubts but the supreme consolation of lovingly embracing the body.

Deeply touched by the sorrow of the intimate scene and desirous to comfort the immense pain of that irremediable evil, Ana said humbly:

"Master, we must be courageous and calm. In my private prayers I always ask the prophet of Nazareth to sustain you from heaven, to comfort your suffering, despondent heart!"

The senator's thoughts were wandering through a maze of appalling questions. Comparing his daughter's remarks with

Ana's words, he was trying to figure out who was guilty of the crime. Who of the two, Plinius or Saul, should be held responsible for the heinous murder? He, Publius, who had presided over so many difficult cases in his life; he, a senator who missed no opportunity to participate in the endeavors of the Roman aedileship[57], now felt the supreme pain of exercising justice in his own home with the prospects of completely destroying the happiness of his beloved children!

Nevertheless, as he listened to his servant's consoling words, he recalled the extraordinary figure of Jesus the Nazarene, whose doctrine of compassion and mercy gave strength to so many to face the harshest situations in life – or to die heroically as his own wife had. Turning to his servant with unexpected intimacy in a moving gesture of kind simplicity she had never seen before under any circumstances in his domestic life, he said:

"Ana, my entire life I have always been a very strict man, but there comes a time when one's soul feels humbled by the harshness of the struggles of this world, filled with bitter and painful illusions! Even if you are considered only a servant, I have come to appreciate you, albeit belatedly!"

A spontaneous tear choked his voice, but the aging patrician continued:

"Over the course of my life I have judged a huge number of various cases according to the world's justice; but for some time now I have felt that I am being judged by the uncontrollable force of a supreme justice, whose tribunals are not to be found on this earth!

"Ever since Livia's death, I have changed; I feel my soul has gained an awareness unbeknownst to me before.

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[57] Board of magistrates in charge of public buildings, streets, markets, games, etc. http://dictionary.reference.com. – Tr.

"The approach of old age seems to be a precursor to the death of all our dreams and hopes!

"Standing before this body, which will most certainly increase the shroud of our family's secrets, I feel how painful it is to judge our loved ones. Since you mentioned the Master of Nazareth, whose doctrine of peace and fraternity taught so many to die with supreme resignation and heroism for the victory of his earthly sacrifices, how would he proceed in a case like this, where enormous doubts hover over my heart regarding the guilt of a beloved son?"

"Master," Ana replied humbly, deeply moved by his consideration and kindness, "Jesus often taught us that we should never judge so that we ourselves would not be judged in turn."

The senator was surprised to hear this wonderful summation of human philosophy from someone who in his opinion was so simple and unlearned, and he recalled his painful past.

"However," he ventured, as if wanting to justify his past wrongs as a public figure, "those who do not judge tend to forgive and forget; and if the laws of life command us to be thankful for the good that is done to us, then we cannot forgive the evil hurled at us along the way!"

Ana did not miss the opportunity to reinforce the teachings of the Gospel, and added gently:

"Even in my own country, the old law demanded an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But without destroying the essence of the temple teachings, Jesus of Nazareth explained that those who err most in the world are the ones who are the unhappiest and most in need of our spiritual support. In his doctrine of love and charity, he recommends that we forgive not just once, but seventy times seven times."

Publius Lentulus was amazed to learn from his servant such altruistic concepts concerning the principles of unrestricted

forgiveness. Forgive? He had never done that in his contentious struggles in the world. His upbringing did not admit compassion or commiseration for one's enemies, because, for those of his class, forgiveness and humility meant betrayal or cowardice.

It came to his mind now that, in numerous political cases, he could have forgiven, and that in many circumstances in his life he could have closed the eyes of his severity with loving forgetfulness.

Without knowing why, an unknown force redirected his thought to times gone by and his memories took him back to the remote journey to Judea. He recalled the scene where, in his strictness, he had mercilessly enslaved a poor boy. Yes, that young man was also named Saul. His mind, torn by atrocious questions, went from Saul, the freedman, to Plinius, whom he had held always in an aura of love and benevolence.

Forgive?

The senator's mind delved into bitter and very painful thoughts during those long, anguished minutes. It was perhaps one of the few times in his life when his mind was in doubt, afraid to let the severity of his judgment fall upon the head of a very dear son.

Coming out of his pondering, however, he said resolutely:

"Ana, the Nazarene prophet must have indeed been a divine figure here on earth! I, however, am human and lack the strength to live a life outside of my reality ... I want to forgive but cannot ... I want to judge in this case and I don't know how ... But I will have to come up with a solution to this terrible problem! I will do everything possible to observe the precepts of your Master and maintain an attitude of silence until I discover the truly guilty party. Then I will try not to judge as humans do, but ask that his divine justice be manifested to sustain my thoughts and guide my actions."

Regaining his usual stamina for the struggles of life, the aging patrician stated:

"Now, we must deal with life and its painful realities."

He placed Agrippa's body on the bed and asked Ana to prepare his daughter, supporting her in the anguishing ordeal. Then, he opened the doors of the room, requested the presence of all the household servants and notified the authorities. At the same time, he conducted a rigorous inquest in order to ascertain the origin of the crime, although such an occurrence was considered extremely commonplace in the troubled times of Domitius Nero's Rome.

Some of the servants claimed to have seen Plinius Severus with his brother that evening, but the senator dismissed this information stating that the victim's brother had left during the day for the port of Massilia.

Therefore, Saul was naturally the next person asked to give an account of his whereabouts. Even before the funeral ceremonies were held, the senator, interrogating him privately, had reason to believe he was guilty by observing his evasions and erratic allusions, all of which failed to satisfy his psychological examination. Saul's affirmations and innuendoes did not coincide with the incisive assertions of Ana, whose integrity he knew very well. In some of his statements, Saul denied having been in Agrippa's rooms at all, and that was enough for the senator to know he was lying.

As for Plinius, he was nowhere to be found. There was only the laconic notification of his departure for Massilia, which, in fact, had taken place on the same night of the tragedy after the critical altercation with his brother in the Aventine palace.

He was heading to Gaul in a luxurious galley with Aurelia, sailing the calm waters of the ancient Roman seas.

The senator only wanted to hear more of his daughter's confidences in order to extract the ultimate confession from Flaminius' wretched freedman, whose guilt he no longer doubted.

Thus, it was with the greatest discretion that he carried out the funeral rites of his memorable friend's son, which Saul of Gioras had the shamelessness to attend with all the poisonous calmness of his wicked spirit.

Flavia Lentulia's physical suffering had greatly increased due to the harmful effect of the lethal toxins administered by Ateia, the treacherous servant paid by Aurelia, and who, in her lack of conscience, had poisoned all the cosmetics her mistress used for treating her hair and eyelashes. The senator's daughter's mental suffering also greatly increased due to her unanswered questions regarding the horrific event.

Her childhood illness seemed to have returned; her body was once again covered in painful sores; her eyes were seemingly attacked by an implacable disease.

Three days after Agrippa's funeral, a deeply grieved Publius Lentulus listened with the utmost loving and interested attention to her intimate and anguished testimony. When his daughter finished her detailed account, her marital unhappiness touching his heart deeply, the aging senator demanded to interrogate Saul once more, this time in her presence. However, when he sent an emissary to find Flaminius's freedman, he was astonished by a new surprise.

After responding to Publius Lentulus's private questioning prior to Agrippa's funeral rites, Saul of Gioras clearly perceived Publius's mental attitude toward him and concluded that he would not be able to deceive the aging senator's psychological discernment.

Two days after the funeral ceremonies, the freedman went looking for Araxes in his wretched location on Esquilinus with a perturbed and uneasy soul.

Sincerely believing in the miraculous interventions of the mage due to his faculties of divination – albeit used by the dark forces of the invisible plane connected to his sinister ambitions for money – Saul saw that the fortuneteller received him with

his usual mysterious nature. He made sure that his large, full bag was quite visible, as if to show him his rich financial potential for acquiring the talisman of his good fortune.

Wrinkled with age, the old sorcerer recognized Saul's generous intentions and broke out in smiles of ambitious and enigmatic benevolence, seeming to penetrate his easily frightened and uneasy look with his shifty and piercing eyes.

"Araxes," said Saul in an almost pleading voice, "I'm tired of waiting for the love of the woman I adore! I'm troubled and preoccupied ... I need to put my painful tribulations at ease. Listen to me! I want the talisman of happiness for my unlucky love!"

The old fortuneteller held his head between his hands for a few minutes, in that gesture that was peculiar to him, and then replied in a nearly inaudible voice:

"Sir, the voices of the invisible tell me that your afflictions are not the result of a misunderstood and desperate love..."

But suffering from the deepest desperation of conscience for having killed a friend and benefactor in the full bloom of youth, Flaminius's freedman cut him off, shouting incisively:

"How dare you contradict me, you wicked sorcerer?"

With a strange gleam in his darting eyes, Araxes quickly replied:

"So you call me a wicked sorcerer? Even so, I will not fail to speak the truth when it suits me."

"I repeat what I said! And for that matter, what mysterious truths are you alluding to with your rambling words?" asked the freedman, thoroughly exasperated.

"The truth, my friend," said the sorcerer with an almost sinister serenity, "is that you are so disturbed simply because you are a criminal. You killed a benefactor and friend in cold blood, and the conscience of a ruffian fears the implacable action of justice!"

"Shut up, you bastard! How could you know?" shouted Saul, enraged as he drew his dagger from the folds of his cloak.

And advancing on the helpless old man, he added in a cavernous voice:

"Since your occult knowledge gives you information that is harmful to the peace of mind of others, you too must die!"

Araxes realized that the moment was decisive. That impetuous man was capable of killing him with a single blow. Assessing the situation in a glance and gathering all his shrewdness to save his skin, he cracked a false, indulgent smile and said:

"Come now, if I spoke the truth it was only to show you my spiritual powers. If you wish, I can place the necessary talisman in your possession immediately. With it you will be deeply loved by the woman of your choice ... With it you will change the innermost sentiments of this creature you adore. She will give you the happiness of a lifetime. As far as the rest goes, you're not the first to take the life of someone else. Every day, customers come to me in your situation, knocking on these doors. Moreover, we have a lot of mutual trust between us; after all, you have been my customer for more than ten years."

Upon hearing these benevolent and serene words, Saul put his weapon away as he contemplated new prospects for happiness. He agreed to go along with everything the fortuneteller said. Araxes made him sit down, and occupied his attention for more than an hour with a description of facts identical to those that were happening to him, demonstrating theoretically the effectiveness of his miraculous amulets. The conversation was still in progress, when Saul finally asked him to hand over the talisman immediately because he wanted to try it out that very day. Araxes hastily replied:

"Your talisman is ready. I can give you this precious lucky charm right now; it will depend only on you yourself, for you

will have to drink the magic potion that will put you in the spiritual state required for such commitment."

Saul did not hesitate to submit to the old Egyptian's impositions, with his strange and mysterious ruses. He entered a chamber decorated with various bizarre symbols completely unknown to him.

Araxes performed the most suggestive theatrics. Over Saul's ordinary toga he put a loose tunic identical to his own, and after a few feigned motions of incomprehensible magic, he went inside the small laboratory, where he picked out a deadly poison, saying to himself: "You are about to receive the talisman that suits you the most."

He placed a few drops of the potion in a glass of wine, and with broad, ostentatious gestures, as if he were obeying an occult ritual, he gave it to Saul to drink as he continued his exotic gestures, which were actually the picturesque and sinister expressions of a bizarre death magic.

Swallowing the wine with the happy intent of absorbing the amulet of his bliss, Saul felt his limbs giving way under the control of an unknown and destructive force. His voice failed to express his innermost emotions. He wanted to scream but could not, and all his efforts to stand up were useless. Little by little, his eyes clouded over somberly as if dimmed by a heavy, indefinable darkness. He wished to express his hatred toward the murderous sorcerer, to defend himself from the anguish strangling his throat, but his tongue was stiff and a penetrating cold started to take over his vital centers. Letting his head hang over his elbows on the large table, he realized that a violent death was destroying all the living forces of his organism.

Araxes calmly closed the room as if nothing had happened, and returned to the shop, solicitously tending to his large clientele without breaking his habitual serenity.

Before nightfall, however, he entered the death chamber and emptied the dead man's bag, putting the coins away silently among the ample reserves of his greed.

After eleven o'clock, when the city was asleep, the old sorcerer of Esquilinus, blending in with the slaves doing the nighttime transportation, pushed a small hand cart holding a large bundle.

After a long trek he reached the vicinity of the Forum between the Capitol and Palatinus, where he rested, waiting for the final quarter of dawn to finally dump his load in a dark spot by the public road before returning calmly to his nightly sleep.

In the morning, Saul's body was easily identified, and while the senator was looking for the freedman for his statements, he received the surprising news. Publius Lentulus wondered about the reason for that unexpected and strange death, astonished at the interconnections of the mechanism of divine justice, and further wondered if Saul might not be one of those criminals immediately sentenced by the law of compensation, wherein we reap what we sow on the infinite pathway of human destinies.

The senator was more inclined than ever toward the examination of profound philosophical questions and would ponder for hours on end. Recalling the recommendation of Flaminius's spirit and Ana's elevated lessons based on the Gospel, he sought with all his heart to resolve the question of forgiveness and compassion. Yearning to appease his own conscience in the acts of practical life, he sought to go against his traditions and customs in the tragic event. And so, heading to the home of Agrippa's murderer, he took every measure for the funeral ceremonies to be carried out with decorum and respect. A few slaves and trusted servants were qualified to resolve any problems pertaining to business matters left behind by the deceased. Attending the funeral

service, Publius Lentulus felt contented in having overcome his personal aversion, and at the same time paying tribute to the memory of Flaminius.

Plinius Severus had settled with his new companion in Avenius. He was told by friends about the tragedy that had taken place in Rome the night he had left, and he became aware of the terrible doubts hovering over him. Deeply moved, he remembered his brother, who had shown him the highest proofs of love so many times, and he wanted to return to clear up the matter rightly and avenge his death. However, indolently quiescent in Aurelia's arms, he feared the judgment of the aging senator, whom he respected as a father, and he was also wary because of his wife's inexplicable illness; hence, he stuck to his inconceivable life style as he traveled through Avenius, Massilia, Arelatus, Antipolis and Nice, trying to drown his responsibilities in wine and pleasure.

With Aurelia, the official's life passed in contemptible tranquility for three long years, until the day he had the dreadful surprise of finding his perfidious and insensitive companion in the arms of the musician and singer Sergius Acerronius, who had arrived in Massilia full of the boisterous merriment of the empire's capital.

On that bitter day of his life, Flaminius's son attacked the unfaithful woman with weapon in hand, ready to take her criminal and dissolute life. At the moment of his retaliation, however, he realized that the murder of a woman, even a diabolically perverse one, should not be a part of his life, and that letting her live the licentious path of her cruelties would be the best revenge for his betrayed and unfortunate heart.

Thus, he abandoned that wretched creature forever. She was eventually murdered by the merciless dagger of Sergius, who did not tolerate her infidelity and persistence in misdeeds.

Feeling all alone, Plinius Severus bitterly pondered the disastrous wrongs of his life. He reviewed his past of condemnable futilities and insane attitudes. Nearly broke, he felt too wretched to return to Rome, where he had shone so many times in his youth in wanton and merry adventures.

In vain the senator sent him loving appeals. Summoned to self-respect by the painful lessons of his destiny, the official, supported by some friends from Rome, preferred to make his efforts at rehabilitation in the cities of Gaul, where he would remain for many years in silent and arduous work to restore his name before his family members and closest friends.

Having already reached a mature age and making room for deep reflections, his effort to rehabilitate himself so far from those most dear to him was enormous.

As for the aging senator, he decisively endured the harsh blows of fate within his strict spiritual structure. Making the struggles of each day a pathway to enlightenment, he watched the years pass by without becoming discouraged or idle.

Since the tragic events in which Saul and Agrippa mysteriously lost their lives, and in addition to her husband's obvious abandonment, Flavia Lentulia's health had been broken forever. Ateia's poisons had been neutralized and overcome by medicinal substances applied to her skin, but the light in her eyes had gone out for good. Dispirited and blind, she nevertheless found in Ana's generous heart the maternal affection that she had lacked in the painful circumstances of her life.

The senator's physical constitution, however, resisted all attacks and misfortunes.

Between his efforts at loving care for his daughter and the political activities that took up most of his attention, Publius's days passed by filled with bitter struggles, silent and sad as always. In his soul there was now the best and most sincere willingness

to learn the essence of the sacred teachings of Christianity, and it was thus that his soul entered the twilight of old age, as if the darkness had been lightened by caressing and gentle stars. Deep within he felt an imperturbable calm, but his public life was filled with the restless endeavors of the times. His heart was resigned to the painful and bitter disappointments of destiny, but a tyrant occupying the seat of supreme power of the Empire had to be removed in favor of the preservation of law and family. And so, together with numerous friends, he immersed himself in the subtle work of internal politics for the fall of Domitius Nero, who continued to subject the city to the hateful spectacles of his horrifying reign.

Gaius Piso and Seneca, as well as other venerable figures of the time who were devoted to patriotism and the love of justice, fell under the criminal hands of the miscreant who wore the crown. Publius Lentulus, however, joined other brothers sharing the same ideals, and working in silence and in the shadow of secret diplomacy with the military and the people, waited for the death or banishment of the tyrant, hoping for the future, which came with the short-lived reign of Sergius Sulpicius Galba, who, in the words of Tacitus, would have been considered by all worthy of the supreme government of the Empire if he had not been Emperor.

VIII
Amid the Destruction of Jerusalem

After the year 58 more than ten silently sorrowful years went by in the day-to-day lives of our story's characters.

Only in 68 did the conciliatory political actions of a large number of patricians – among them Publius Lentulus – achieve the permanent removal of Domitius Nero and his atrocious cruelties. Galba's reign lasted only a few months, however, and the year 69 would define major events in the life of the empire.

Numerous struggles filled the city with terror and blood.

The awful dispute between Otho and Vitellius divided all classes of the Roman family into hostile factions that hated each other in the extreme.

Finally, the famous Battle of Bedriacum gave the throne to Vitellius, who initiated a new series of cruelties in all political sectors.

The internal governance, however, watched in the shadows, attentively monitoring the situation so as not to allow a new outbreak of extermination and infamy.

Vitellius held the government for only eight months, because in the same year of 69, under the subtle guidance of those who had overthrown Nero and his partisans, legions from the African territory proclaimed Vespasian for the highest investiture of the Empire. The new emperor was still on the battlefield fighting for the pacification of far-off Judea, but he agreed to meet the demands of all the civil and military classes. Received in triumph for the highest position, he thus began the prestigious era of the Flavian dynasty.

Vespasian was a member of that group of industrious patricians, who, without boasting, had contributed to the fall of the tyrants.

A personal friend of Publius Lentulus, the Emperor had become famous not only for his military victories but also for his judicious political training, evident in Rome since the turbulent days of Caligula.

Under his administrative guidance, there was a hiatus in governmental immorality and the beginning of a new period of understanding the needs of the people. In the wake of his economic-financial plans, the Empire would move toward the regenerative days of a new era.

Publius welcomed these events with all the discreet gladness that his 67 years of struggle and difficult life experiences would allow. In the serene clarity of old age, however, his moral fiber and physical endurance remained the same as ever.

Amid the perspective of better days for patriotic achievements, he now considered the time he had to be away from his blind daughter to work for the common good as well spent. In this state of mind, with his conscience satisfied in

carrying out a duty that conformed to his principles, he went to the palace to answer a special call from the Emperor, who often did not hesitate to turn to the counsel of his oldest companions in the arena of political ideals.

"Senator," said Vespasian in the tranquil privacy of one of the magnificent offices of the imperial residence, "I have sent for you to get the support of your well-known dedication to the Empire in order to solve a matter that I consider to be of the utmost importance."[58]

"I am at your service, Augustus!" answered Publius, moved.

But the emperor kindly corrected him:

"No, my friend, let's understand each other with the close friendship of old times. Let's set aside protocols for a moment."

As the senator flashed a smile of acknowledgement at his direct and kindly words, he proceeded to explain the matter:

"When I was called to Rome for this highest of positions, I did not dare disobey the sacred command that impelled me to fulfill this great duty, although I had to leave my son with the work of bringing peace to an insurgent Judea, an endeavor that I will consider for the rest of my life to be my best for the well-being of the Empire in the unfolding of its glorious traditions.

"However, the military siege on Jerusalem has been going on for too long, and it has had serious consequences regarding my economic plans for the restoration project I have proposed to carry out in the government.

"I believe that my brave Titus might be in need of some civil counsel in addition to that of the military attendants who are with him in this daring undertaking, and I thought I should arrange for it with only my closest friends who are familiar with Jerusalem and its surroundings.

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[58] Vespasian was in Rome shortly after his proclamation. - Emmanuel.

"At the time of my early incursions in aedileship, I became familiar with your involvement in the administrative reform of Judea, and therefore with your stay in Jerusalem more than twenty years ago.

"So, I would like for you and a few of our other friends to accept the job of directing my son's military tactics more appropriately. Titus needs the political cooperation of someone who knows all the ins and outs of the city as well as its dialects in order to overcome a situation that is becoming increasingly disturbing."

Publius Lentulus thought of his sick daughter for a moment, but remembering Ana's absolute dedication to her, which could very well replace his own care for some time, he replied decisively and enthusiastically:

"Noble Emperor, your august word is the word of the Empire. The Empire orders and I obey. I would be honored to follow your orders and I hope I can live up to your generous trust."

"Thank you so much!" said Vespasian, extending his hand, extremely pleased. "Everything will be made ready for you and two or three of our friends to depart in about two weeks."

And thus it was.

After sorrowful goodbyes from his daughter, who remained under her dedicated servant's care at the Aventine villa, the senator boarded a luxurious galley which, setting sail from Ostia, quickly entered the open sea bound for Judea.

With painful serenity the old patrician relived the events of the same journey of his fortunate youth, when he was unaware of how happy he was in the company of his wife and his two little children.

Yes, the figure of little Marcus, his vanished son, seemed to appear once again before his eyes in an aura of radiant and holy delight.

On a day in Capernaum he had succumbed to the slanderous lies of Sulpicius Tarquinius, doubting his wife's honor and consequently believing that his son's abduction had been a result of her unfaithfulness. Livia, however, was now absolved of all guilt in the court of his conscience. Her sacrifices at home and her heroic death in the circus constituted the maximum proof of the sublime purity of her heart. During these moments of pondering, it seemed that he returned to the past with its unending sufferings, always to run up against the heavy darkness of the mystery as he tried to revisit the pages of that painful chapter in his life.

To what impenetrable and unknown abyss could the little one who would have carried on his noble ancestry have been taken?

His paternal sentiments seemed to awaken once again after so many years and so much family suffering.

Although the most painful questions hovered in his mind, the senator, in the strictness of his moral fiber, preferred to believe that Marcus Lentulus had been murdered by common criminals given to thievery and terrorism, and that he would never again require his paternal devotion.

This is what he wanted to believe, but that journey was for him an analysis of his dearest and most poignant memories.

In the soft light of dusk on the Mediterranean, he seemed to see Livia rocking the little one to sleep, or speaking to him in loving, consoling words; at the same time he glimpsed in his imagination the figure of Comenius, his trusted servant amid all the other subordinates and slaves.

Along with three other civil counselors, he arrived at his destination with no major problems. This small council of the emperor's close friends placed itself immediately at Titus's disposal. Titus took advantage of their counsel, utilizing with

great success their opinions, the fruit of their vast experience with the region and its local customs.

The emperor's son was kind and loyal to all his compatriots, who considered him as a friend and benefactor. Toward his enemies, however, Titus was unspeakably ruthless. Several legions of soldiers gathered around his fiery and fearless figure and they fought with savage cruelty.

Ending in 70, the siege of Jerusalem was one of the fiercest in the history of humankind.

The city was besieged just when endless multitudes of pilgrims had come from every part of the province to gather at the famous temple for the feasts of unleavened bread, hence the high number of casualties and the dreadfully hostile fighting of the famous resistance.

The number of the dead in those terrible clashes rose to more than a million, with the Romans taking nearly a hundred thousand prisoners, eleven thousand of which were massacred in dolorous scenes of blood and savagery by the victorious legions after culling the able-bodied men.

The old senator felt grieved by the horrific spectacles of carnage, but it was his duty to fulfill his promise, and it was with the best spirit of courage that he carried out his responsibility.

His counsel and knowledge were often used with success and he became a private counselor to the Emperor's son.

Every day, in the company of his friend Senator Pompilius Crassus, he visited the advanced posts of the attacking forces, assessing the effectiveness of the new guidelines followed by the military strategy of his compatriots. Several times the commander in charge warned them not to advance too far, but Publius Lentulus did not show the least bit of fear at his age as he carried out detailed topographic reconnaissance of the famous city.

Finally, on the day before the fall of Jerusalem, the fighting was almost hand-to-hand at all points of entry, with mutual incursions into enemy camps and reciprocal cruelties against all who had the misfortune to be taken prisoner.

In spite of the protection surrounding them, Publius and his friend, due to their fearless courage, fell into the hands of some enemies, who, noticing their garb as being that of high dignitaries of the Imperial Court, immediately took them to one of the desperate resistance's commanders who was holed up in a large building serving as a military barracks next to the Tower of Antonia.

As Publius Lentulus watched the scenes of savagery and blood as the nameless, insurgent mob slaughtered numerous Roman citizens right before their eyes, he remembered the sorrowful afternoon on Calvary, where the merciful prophet from Nazareth had succumbed to the cross under the terrifying uproar of the infuriated crowd. As the old senator walked ahead, brutally and harshly prodded, he considered that if this was to be the moment of his death, he should die as heroically as his wife had, in self-sacrifice for his principles, despite the fundamental difference between the kingdom of Jesus and the empire of Caesar. The thought of leaving Flavia Lentulia an orphan of his love troubled his heart; however, he realized that his daughter would have Ana's benevolent and assiduous dedication as well as the material support of his fortune.

It was in this state of mind, taken by the unfolding of events, that he went down long streets filled with commotion, shouting, cursing and blood.

Overcome with fear, Jerusalem was mobilizing its final efforts to avoid total ruin.

After a few hours Publius and his friend, exhausted from fatigue and thirst, were led into the somber office of a Jewish commander,

who was issuing the most merciless orders of torture and death for all Roman prisoners in retaliation for the enemy's atrocities.

It took just one look at the familiar features of the old Israelite for Publius to search hastily for a similar figure in the collection of his innermost, remote memories.

He could not place him immediately.

However, the old commander rested his astute gaze on him, and making a gesture of satisfaction, exclaimed with a spark of hatred in each word:

"Most noble senators," he emphasized with irony and disdain, "I recognize you from many years ago ..."

And looking at Publius, he stressed malevolently:

"I am especially honored by the presence of the proud senator Publius Lentulus, former legate of Tiberius and his successors in this province, persecuted and scourged by the Roman vermin. I am very glad that the forces of destiny have not yet allowed me to depart to the other world in my laborious old age without avenging an unforgettable injustice."

Advancing toward the old patrician, who looked at him in extreme astonishment, he repeated with angry insistence:

"Don't you recognize me?"

The senator's face, however, revealed only his profound physical exhaustion in light of that harsh trial in his life; in vain he focused on the slight and wily figure of Andre of Gioras, who now enjoyed a high position at the famous temple due to the fortune he had amassed.

Publius answered all his questions with a silent negative gesture. Seeing that he was not recognized by the prisoner, whose presence interested him more than the other, the old Jew answered his own question sarcastically:

"Publius Lentulus, I am Andre of Gioras, the father you once insulted with the excess of your prideful authority. Remember?"

The prisoner nodded.

Seeing that his insolence did not intimidate Publius, the leader of Jerusalem insisted, exasperated:

"Why do you not humble yourself right now before my authority? Do you not know that I can decide your fate today? ... Why do you not beg me for mercy?"

Publius was exhausted. He remembered his early days in Jerusalem and recalled the visit of this intelligent, gruff farmer. He tried to recall the steps he had taken in his capacity as a public figure to enable the Jew's son to return to his father's house, but he did not remember having instilled so much hatred in that troubled heart. Obeying his inner spiritual disposition, he decided to say nothing to that exasperated and truculent figure. But in the face of impertinent insistence, without abdicating the old traditions of pride and vanity that used to characterize him, and as if wanting to demonstrate fearlessness under such painful circumstances, he finally replied forcefully:

"If you actually think you are here to fulfill a sacred obligation that is above any personal and unworthy sentiments, do not expect me to ask you for mercy, because you are doing your duty."

Andre of Gioras frowned, exasperated by this unexpected response. Pacing back and forth in his large office, he seemed to ponder the best way to carry out his terrible revenge.

After a few minutes of somber silence, as if arriving at a solution worthy of his barbaric plans, he called one of his guards in a sullen voice:

"Go in haste and tell Italus that he must be here early tomorrow in order to carry out my orders."

As the emissary turned to leave, he addressed the two prisoners:

"The fall of Jerusalem is imminent, but I will give the last drop of my old blood to exterminate the vipers of our people. Your accursed race came to fatten itself on this elect city, but I exult in my vengeance on both of you, proud dignitaries of the empire of impiety and crime! By the time the gates of Jerusalem open, I will have carried out my implacable purpose!"

He became silent, and a mere gesture was enough for the two friends to be thrown into a damp, dark dungeon, where they spent a dreadful night of dolorous conjectures as they shared bitter confidences.

The next morning they were summoned to their final ordeal.

The first noises of the victorious Roman forces were heard in the city as they terrorized and plundered the humiliated and defenseless population.

Infused with infernal and anguished screaming, the hasty exodus of women and children could be seen everywhere, but a considerable number of leaders and combatants had taken refuge in that large building with its thick stone walls in order to make their last stand.

Publius and Pompilius were led into a large room from which they could hear the growing noise of victory of the imperial armies after their dramatic and bloody advance in that time filled with terror, plunder and fighting. Nevertheless, in that spacious and fortified room they were facing the gazes of hundreds of armed warriors and some political leaders from the Israelite resistance.

In light of the victorious advance of the Roman legions, uneasiness and fear were noticeable on every face, together with a general interest in the two important prisoners from the Empire, as if they represented the last object with which they could satisfy their hatred and vengeance.

Changing that indecisive situation, Andre of Gioras spoke in a strange and sinister voice that reverberated in every corner:

"Men! We are coming to the end of our desperate defense, but we have the consolation of holding two great leaders of the cursed policy of plunder of the Roman Empire! One of them is Pompilius Crassus, who began his career as a public figure in this unfortunate province, inaugurating a long period of terror among our wretched compatriots! The other is Publius Lentulus, legate of Tiberius and his successors in Judea, which has continued to be humiliated ever since. He enslaved our children while they were still young and organized criminal procedures in all the provincial regions, fostering fear among our persecuted and scourged brothers from his villa in Galilee! Very well! Before the evil soldiers of imperial pillaging imprison and annihilate us, we shall carry out our plans!"

Everybody listened to his words as if they were the supreme order of a leader to be blindly obeyed.

The two senators were bound with heavy pieces of iron to the torture posts. They were unable to move at all except for their eyes, silent and serene in their suffering.

"Our revenge," the hateful Israelite explained again, "must obey the ancient rules. Pompilius Crassus must die first because he is the older, and so that the vain senator Publius Lentulus may comprehend our efforts to eliminate the power of his evil empire."

Pompilius gazed at length at his friend, as if to bid him an anguished, silent farewell in his final hour.

"Nicandrus, the job is yours," exclaimed Andre, turning to one of his companions.

And handing the sturdy soldier a sinister-looking sword, he added with profound irony:

"Cut out his heart for his friend, who must keep today's scene fixed in his memory forever."

The eyes of the condemned man shone with intense anguish. His face blanched white as a sheet, revealing the pain-

filled emotions of his soul. He and his companion in bitterness exchanged an unforgettable glance.

Publius Lentulus watched the accomplishment of the nefarious operation in a few quick minutes. The white-haired head of the executed man fell forward with the first blow of the sword, and his beating, bloody heart was violently wrenched from his old chest.

Meanwhile, the surviving senator heard the noise of the approaching victorious Romans, perceiving that they were by now fighting man-to-man at the doors of that turbulent assembly of crime and retaliation. The monstrous scene filled his ever-optimistic and decisive soul with dismay, but he did not lose his self-imposed lofty and strict composure during the anguishing ordeal.

After Pompilius's execution – carried out quickly because they were all aware of the horrific fate that their conquerors had in store for them – Andre of Gioras once again raised his voice:

"My friends," he declared somberly, "for the older one, the merciful penalty of death; but to this infamous patrician we shall grant the dolorous penalty of life within the tomb of his insane illusions of vanity and pride! Publius Lentulus, former emissary of emperors, shall live! Yes, but without the eyes that have lighted the way of his supreme selfishness over our great misfortunes! We shall allow him to live so that in the darkness of his night he will have to see through the eyes of the slaves he has trampled upon throughout his life."

A painful silence fell over the place, while outside the stomping of horses and the clanking of armor could be heard, along with the sinister sound of voices cursing in the desperate resistance of the last stronghold.

Andre of Gioras, however, seemed drunk on the pleasure of his revenge, and with his magnetic and persuasive words

holding the attention of the participants in that tragic hour of their destiny, he said forcefully:

"Italus, this time the job is yours."

Among the crowded and anxious onlookers a man stood out, seeming to be around 40 years old and surprising the senator with his fine patrician-like features. Their eyes met and in that soul he felt a strange and incomprehensible bond of affinity.

Italus? Did that name remind him of something from the surroundings of his unforgotten Rome? Why would this man, obviously of noble blood, be there fighting alongside the Jews, rebellious and intoxicated with hatred? For his part, the executioner indicated by Andre's commanding voice seemed inclined toward tenderness and pity for that serene old man, with his hands and feet tied to the post of harm. He seemed to be hesitant as to whether he should carry out his master's sinister and pitiless order.

In a few minutes a Jewish soldier came through a wide, dark door with a red-hot iron blade, its sharpened point resting on live coals on a large bronze tray.

Observing with interest the enigmatic figure of Italus in the vitality of his adulthood, the senator, although silent, could not hide his curiosity regarding his straight and refined profile.

Enjoying the scene and noticing the condemned man's focused attention, Andre jolted him from his state of conjecture and surprise, saying ironically:

"Well, Senator, are you admiring Italus's noble bearing? Remember that if the patricians give themselves the luxury of having Israelite slaves, the masters of Judea also make use of servants of the Roman type. Because of the ever-present patrician vermin, I must admit that it would be dangerous to keep a slave like this one in the city; but I have managed to keep this laborer in a rural environment until now."

Publius Lentulus could hardly decipher the hidden meaning of those ironic words, and there was no time for introspection. He noticed that Andre had become quiet, attending to the urgency with which the operation had to be carried out so as not to lose the fiery red heat of the fateful blade.

In front of the many astonished, desperate eyes that did not know whether they should focus on the macabre scene or if they should pay attention to the noisy entry of Titus's forces breaking through the barriers of the last fortification, the implacable executioner handed the terrible instrument of torture to Italus.

"Italus," he ordered forcefully, "this moment is precious. Burn out his eyes and give him a tomb of eternal darkness for the rest of his life."

Moved to tears for the torture he was to inflict with his own hands, the poor man seemed indecisive and unsteady.

"Master," he said imploringly, unable to formulate any objections.

"What are you waiting for?" Andre replied tyrannically, cutting him off. "Will we need the whip for you to obey me?"

Italus submissively took the blade and slowly approached the condemned man, who was filled with resignation and inner fortitude. Before the supreme moment, their eyes met in an exchange of mutual sympathy. Publius Lentulus was still contemplating Italus's bearing, marked by unquestionable nobility, albeit blemished in its most characteristic lines by merciless hard work. So great was the sympathy he felt for that man, captured by the full light of his eyes for the last time, that he recalled his little Marcus, figuring that if he were still alive in such a hostile environment, he must have that bearing and be that age.

Italus's hands, trembling and hesitant, approached the senator's tired eyes as if in a sweet attitude of affection; but swift

as lightning, the fiery iron blade smote the senator's proud, clear eyes, immersing them in darkness forever.

At this, the victim heard an infernal shouting resounding throughout the room.

An unspeakable pain radiated from the burn, causing him atrocious suffering. He saw nothing beyond the thick darkness that covered his soul, but he guessed that the victorious forces had arrived too late to save him.

In the midst of the deafening noise, Andre of Gioras approached the condemned man, saying in his ear:

"I should kill you, you infamous senator, but I want you to live. Now I am going to tell you who the torturer of your final moment was!"

But a violent blow from a sword brandished by a Roman legionnaire caused the old Jew to fall senseless to the ground, while a well-aimed sword struck Italus, who, indecisive in his stupefaction, fell with a thud beside the tortured man, embracing his feet in a meaningful and final gesture.

Friendly voices surrounded Publius Lentulus in that tumultuous place. They immediately untied his hands and feet, restoring his freedom of movement while other legionnaires removed Pompilius Crassus's body with its empty chest, a frightening picture of bloody savagery.

After the initial clamor died down, Publius Lentulus, harboring the most pain-filled questions regarding his implacable enemy's reticent words, and before being led by the arm to the command of operational forces, where he would receive first aid, ordered that Italus's body be treated with the utmost respect as it lay next to a pile of bloody remains. While his request was being fulfilled, someone interjected:

"Senator, your own condition is of utmost importance; it requires our most urgent care."

And as if he wanted to extract a spontaneous explanation from the wounded man as to his interest in the dead one, he politely asked:

"Wasn't this the one who inflicted this horrendous torture on you?"

Answering this unexpected question, and needing to justify his attitude to his compatriots, Publius exclaimed in a poignant voice:

"No, my friend. This man, whose body I cannot see, was one of our own countrymen, imprisoned for a long, long time by the vengeful fury of a powerful master of Jerusalem ... Notice his noble features and you will agree with me!"

And as he left, supported by his friends to receive immediate medical attention, he believed he had done a duty in saying those words, because mysterious voices were speaking to his heart about that kindly glance that had rested on his eyes for the last time.

For several days, Jerusalem was given over to the plunder and chaos of the imperial troops, starved for pleasure and intoxicated with the sinister wine of victory. All the leaders of the Jewish resistance were imprisoned in order to appear in Rome for the final sacrifice in honor of the commemorative victory celebrations. Among them was Andre of Gioras. Having survived his wounds, he was one of those who would be put to death for the enjoyment of the festive audience in the imperial capital.

After the slaughter of eleven thousand wounded or disabled prisoners by the conquering legions, after the terrifying spectacle of the destruction and plunder of the magnificent temple, in which Israel had believed its eternal and divine work for all the generations of its prolific posterity lay, the caravan of the victorious and defeated returned, filled with illicit treasures and marvelous trophies in order to exhibit in Rome

all the illustrative ornaments of victory amid a tumultuous atmosphere and hymns of triumph.

In a comfortable and peaceful galley, Publius Lentulus, resigned to the dense night of his blindness, traveled surrounded by attentive friends who did everything they could to lessen his suffering.

Before arriving in Rome, he considered the best way to approach Andre to force the truth out of him in order to quiet his inner doubts as to the identity of the Roman-like slave, who had taken his precious gift of sight forever. He was blind now, and to fulfill this desire he would have to endure a lengthy process of outside collaboration, and thus he had not yet figured out the best way to question the Jew without harming the traditions of the personal dignity that he had maintained throughout his public life.

In this stalemate, he arrived at the Aventine villa, accompanied by numerous friends from his political work, surprising and saddening his daughter with the tragic news of his blindness.

A true disciple of Christianity, Ana, like a fraternal angel and brave sister to all unfortunates, waited lovingly for her master with Flavia, who, filled with overwhelming despondency, cried out:

"Father, Father, what a calamity!"

The old patrician, however, comforted his daughter with his optimism:

"Dear child, do not wonder too deeply about the problems of destiny. In all of life's events we must praise the sovereign designs of heaven. I hope that you too will find new courage, because I will be living only like this, close to you in loving and mutual consolation! It is this very destiny that has removed me from the activities of the State so that I may live only for you from now on."

They embraced movingly, merged in the same misfortune, the vibrations of two souls imprisoned by the same suffering.

Despite his need for rest and the blindness that made it impossible for new initiatives, Publius Lentulus did not lose hope of questioning his implacable enemy one more time, and he looked forward to the day eagerly awaited by the Roman people, the day of the celebrations of triumph.[59]

We should point out that the aging senator had immediately been taken back to the city due to his special condition, whereas the conqueror and his countless legions would enter Rome with the dazzling spectacle of their triumph, in keeping with the many ordinances of the ancient republic.

On the appointed day, the entire Capital, with its population of approximately a million and a half, awaited the magnificent victory celebrations.

Unarmed, the conquering legions had begun gathering at the gates of the city early in the morning wearing fine silk tunics and showing off their laurel crowns of victory. After they had passed through the city gates to the thunderous applause of the endless multitudes, they were offered a splendid banquet presided over by the emperor and his son.

Right after the ceremonies of the Senate in the Portico of Octavius, Vespasian and Titus headed for the Triumphal

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[59] The *Triumph* was a religious ceremony of Etruscan origin. It was the highest honor a military commander could receive. In order to receive a triumph, a Roman general had to be the decisive victor (at least 5,000 killed) over a foreign enemy. The parade included the general's soldiers, often carrying placards with slogans describing the general or showing maps of the territories he conquered. Other soldiers led carts containing booty that would be turned over to Rome's treasury. A section of the parade included prisoners, often the leaders of the defeated cities or countries, sometimes with their children, bound in chains. Another section of the parade included the animals that would be sacrificed in thanks for the victory. When the procession reached the Capitoline, the triumphator offered sacrifice to Jupiter and then dismissed his troops. The day concluded with feasts throughout the city to which virtually every citizen was invited. [Abridged]. http://abacus.bates.edu. –Tr.

Gate. There, they offered a sacrifice to the gods and received the symbols of triumph at the pompous imperial festivities. After this ceremony was over, the grand parade started off. Publius Lentulus did not miss it, secretly hoping to hear the revealing facts from the imprisoned leader, whose body, after the sacrifices of the day, would be thrown into the waters of the Tiber according to the prevailing traditions.

All the trophies from the bloody battles, along with the enormous number of the conquered, were also led in procession during that celebration beyond words.

At the front of the immense pageant came an incalculable number of works of pure gold, decorated with a variety of garish colors. These were immediately followed by precious stones in uncountable numbers, not only set in crowns of resplendent beauty, but also woven into fabrics that thrilled the spectators with their variety. All these treasures were carried by young legionnaires wearing purple tunics with stunning golden ornaments.

After the exhibition of the conqueror's treasures came hundreds of gigantic statues of the gods, carved in ivory, gold and silver.

Following the statues came a host of animals of the most varied species, among which several dromedaries and elephants stood out, covered with magnificent precious stones.

Accompanying the animals was a compact and humiliated throng of common prisoners, revealing their misery with downcast eyes as they tried to hide their heavy shackles from the merciless and irreverent spectators.

After the defeated prisoners came the effigies of the conquered and humiliated cities, created with great fastidiousness and held on the shoulders of numerous soldiers, similar to the allegorical floats in today's carnival celebrations. There were representations of all the destroyed and plundered cities and of

victorious battles, not to mention the razing of the countryside, the collapse of city walls and the devastating fires.

After these symbols the abundant booty of the defeated peoples and conquered cities – principally Jerusalem – was paraded, carried diligently by legionnaires. To the clamorous and irreverent applause of the mob, next came statues representing the figures of Abraham and Sarah and the royal members of the family of David, in addition to all the other sacred objects from the famous temple of Jerusalem, such as the solid gold Showbread table, the jubilee trumpets, the seven-armed golden candlestick, ornaments of high intrinsic value, the sacred veils of the temple, and finally, the Law of the Hebrews, which followed all the material booty plundered by the triumphant forces. Each object was mounted on a costly, well-decorated float carried on the shoulders of the laurel-crowned Roman legionnaires.

After the texts of the Law came Simon, the unfortunate supreme leader of the entire resistance movement in Jerusalem, accompanied by his three direct assistants, including Andre of Gioras. These leaders of the long and desperate resistance were dressed in black and would walk solemnly to their deaths after being put on display at all the festive triumphal celebrations.

Immediately thereafter came the superb and magnificent carriages of the conquerors. After Vespasian's dazzling passage, Titus, jubilant with his victory, paraded by in an ocean of purples, silks and vermilion[60], symbolizing Jupiter himself.

The ailing, blind senator also passed by in the retinue of honor, no longer for the pleasure of the tributes, but with the secret desire to question Andre once more before the tragic moment when, to the delirious applause of the people, his body would float down the muddy waters of the Tiber at the consummation of his final torture.

[60] A vivid red to reddish orange. – Tr.

After the imperial carriages of the conquerors and their closest courtiers came the army chanting hymns of victory, while all the streets and plazas, forums and porticos, terraces and windows filled with crowds of curious onlookers.

The procession moved solemnly from the Triumphal Gate to Capitolinus Hill. Several hours were spent along the winding road, for the celebration was structured so as to take its splendors through the most aristocratic corners of the Roman nobility.

At one point, the entire parade stopped before climbing the hill, while the eager eyes of the crowd converged on Simon and his three companions, the direct assistants to his leadership in the resistance of the famous city.

Publius Lentulus, although blind, was familiar with the rituals of those commemorations, and knew that the supreme moment had arrived.

In virtue of his very special case, and considering the deference owed to him, the emperor, concerned with his situation in the procession, asked his son Domitian to see that his needs were met in any circumstance.

At that moment under the noisy reverberations of the people's frenzy, they proceeded with the flogging of Simon in front of all Rome, inebriated with victory, while Andre of Gioras and his two companions were led to the Mamertine Prison[61], where they waited to die together with their leader after his flogging so that their bodies could be dragged through the Gemoniae[62] and thrown into the Tiber as the people watched.

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[61] The Mamertine Prison in Rome was located on the east side of Capitolinus Hill, adjacent to the Roman Forum, and near the Arch of Septimius Severus. According to early church tradition, both Peter and Paul were held prior to their execution in this small building consisting of only two cells, one above the other. Although its name is medieval, the prison was constructed in the 7th century B.C., and consisted of a vast network of dungeons under the city's main sewer. www.padfield.com. – Tr.

[62] The bodies of disgraced criminals in the Roman Empire were thrown onto the Scalae Gemoniae or Gemonian Stairs, where they were left to rot. Usually criminals were

With an anxious soul, but eager to carry out his plan, the senator called the prince in charge of his needs and expressed his desire to speak with one of the prisoners in private and in a secret place. His request was immediately granted.

Domitian carefully took his arm and led him to an annex of the sinister prison, ordering Andre to be placed in an isolated and secret cubicle as Publius had wished. He retired to an adjacent room with a few guards once the condemned man was brought in to be questioned by the senator.

Face-to-face, the two enemies felt strangely uneasy. Publius Lentulus could not see him, but even though his permanently scorched eyes no longer had any emotional expression, his erect bearing revealed the emotions that dominated him.

"Andre," the senator began, profoundly moved, "against all my habits, I have called for this secret meeting in order to clarify my questions about your reticent words in Jerusalem on the day when you carried out your merciless orders against me. I do not wish to discuss your conduct but only to convey to you in this moment, when the justice of the Empire has held you accountable, that I did everything I could to return your imprisoned son to you, responding to a humanitarian duty when I received your supplications. I am sorry that my belated measures did not achieve the desired effect and caused such violent hatred in your heart. Now, however, I no longer give orders. A blind man cannot determine measures of any kind in the face of the painful situation of his own life, but I am asking you to reveal the identity of the slave who burned my sight forever!"

Andre of Gioras felt equally weak in his sickly decrepitude. Moved by the attitude of that humbled and unfortunate father,

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strangled prior to being discarded. Mobs could vent their hostility and dogs could ravage the body before it was pulled off by a hook and tossed into the Tiber River. http://ancienthistory.about.com. – Tr.

and making an inner retrospection of his own criminal acts in the final hours of his life, he replied extremely touched:

"Senator Lentulus, the hour of death is different from all the others that destiny grants our existence while on earth ... Perhaps that is why I now feel my hatred turning into pity as I consider your bitter, harsh suffering. Ever since I was imprisoned, I have been pondering the wrongs of my criminal life ... Working at the Temple and living for the cult of the Law of Moses, only now do I realize that God grants freedom of action to all his children, especially his priests, but that he touches their conscience at the moment of death, when nothing is left but the presentation of a failed soul before a court which no one can lie to or bribe! ... I know it is too late to change the path and redo what has been done; but a new sentiment is enabling me to speak to you here with the sincerity of my heart, which, compelled by the divine judgment, can no longer deceive anyone.

"Nearly forty years ago, your prideful severity ordered the imprisonment of my only son, sending him mercilessly to the galleys, and in vain I implored your clemency as a public figure for my helpless soul ... Instead of the galleys, however, my poor Saul was sent to Rome, where he was despicably sold at a slave market to Senator Flaminius Severus ..."

The blind man had been listening intently and touched, but upon identifying his daughter's torturer in that description, he interrupted Andre:

"Flaminius Severus?

"Yes, like yourself, he was also a senator of the Empire."

Deeply moved as he connected the painful events of his family to the former freedman, but needing all his moral strength to control himself, the senator held his bitterness inside, maintaining an expressive silence while the condemned man continued:

"Even so, Saul was happy ... He embraced his freedom and made a fortune, returning from time to time to Jerusalem, where he helped me to prosper. But I must tell you that, in spite of the texts of the Law that I preached many times, which require us to wish for our neighbor what we wish for ourselves, I did not fold my arms in the face of your criminal arbitrariness, and I swore to avenge myself at any price. Thus, on a calm night, I stole your little Marcus from your residence in Capernaum, in complicity with one of your maidservants, whom I had to poison later on so that she would not reveal the secret and hinder my sinister plans. In your paternal anxiety, you had promised in Jerusalem an award of one grand sestertius to whomever discovered the whereabouts of the little child ... You will certainly remember your maid Semele, who died suddenly in your house ..."

While Andre of Gioras paused in the sad confessions that touched the most intimate fibers of his soul, each word a dagger of bitterness piercing his heart, Publius Lentulus was arriving too late at the knowledge of all the facts, while recalling his wife's anguished sufferings as a slandered wife and loving mother.

Impressed with his pain-filled silence, Andre continued:

"Very well, Senator; obeying my contemptible sentiments, I abducted your little son, who grew up humbly, performing the harshest farm labor ... I annulled his intelligence ... I made it easy for to him to get involved with the most despicable vices for the diabolical pleasure of humiliating my Roman enemy, culminating in my revenge when you and I met unexpectedly! But now I am facing death and I can no longer view our situation except as unfortunate fathers ... I know I will soon appear in the court of the most righteous of judges, and if possible, I would like for you to give me a little peace with your forgiveness!"

The old senator of the Empire would not know how to explain his profound pain as he listened to those grievous and bitter

revelations. Hearing Andre, he felt the impulse to ask about his son as a child, his inclinations, the aspirations of his youth; he wanted to know about his work, his favorite things, but each word of that bitter confession was a stab wound to his most sacred sentiments. Like a mute statue of misfortune, he heard the prisoner asking again, nearly in tears, jolting him from his dark and tormenting wonderings:

"Senator," he insisted, imploring sadly, "forgive me! I want to grasp the spirit of my Law in spite of this final moment! ... Please, pardon my crime and give me the strength to appear before the light of God!"

Publius listened to his pleading voice while a tear of indescribable pain fell from his sad and darkened eyes.

Forgive? But how? Wasn't he, Publius, the offended one and the victim of an entire existence? Singular emotions shook his heart while sobs died in his choked-up throat.

This was the implacable enemy that he had searched for in vain for so many long years of unhappiness. But looking back, he could also understand his own guilt as he recalled the excesses of his vain severity. At this instance in his life he too felt like a dead man walking in the depths of dense darkness. What good were his distinctions and unbridled pride now? All his hopes for happiness were dead. All his dreams destroyed. Owner of a considerable fortune, he would no longer live in the world except to carry the dark casket of his broken illusions; and yet, his heart continued to refuse to forgive in that extreme hour.

He remembered Jesus and his doctrine of love and mercy for his enemies. The Master of Nazareth had forgiven all his executioners and had taught his disciples that we must forgive seventy times seven. He also remembered that his immaculate wife had died for Jesus in the ignominy of the infamous circus; for Jesus, Flaminius had returned from the kingdom of the shades to incline him one day toward forgiveness and mercy...

The noise from outside announced that Andre's final hour was nigh. Simon himself was now entering the prison, unsteady and bleeding after his flogging, signaling their imminent deaths.

At that moment, Publius Lentulus abandoned all his traditions of pride and vanity and felt a crystalline fountain bursting forth in his soul. Copious tears from his expressionless dead eyes ran down his wrinkled and gaunt face, and as if wishing to look at his enemy with his spiritual eyes to show him his commiseration, he said in a firm voice:

"I forgive you."

Returning immediately to the adjoining room without waiting for any response, he knew that his enemy's final hour had arrived.

A few minutes later, Andre of Gioras's body was dragged to the Gemoniae to be thrown into the silent Tiber.

The senator showed no interest at all in the many remaining ceremonies in the Temple of Jupiter.

The procession was now illuminated by the light of a thousand torches placed by slaves on forty elephants at Titus's orders, as the first darkness of night began to fall. Grief-stricken in mental suffering, the senator returned in a litter to the Aventine palace and retired to his private rooms, alleging extreme fatigue.

Feeling his way around in his darkness, he embraced Simeon's cross that had been left to him by his wife's faith, drenching it with the tears of his misfortune.

In deep and sorrowful thought, he understood that Livia had lived for God and he for Caesar, both receiving different compensation on the pathway of destiny. And while the yoke of Jesus had been easy and light for his wife, his arrogant heart was bound to the terrible yoke of the world, buried in its irremediable pains without light and without hope.

IX
Bitter Memories

Soon after the sorrowful events of 70 and according to Flavia's wishes, the senator went to live at his comfortable villa in Pompeii, away from the tumult of the capital. There he could more easily devote himself to his reflections.

The old politician moved his entire voluminous archive there, as well as his life's most cherished and important mementos.

Two highly educated Greek freedmen were hired for reading and writing, and in that way he was able to keep up with all the political and literary news from Rome.

In those remote times, when humankind still had not been granted the priceless benefits of Gutenberg's invention, Roman manuscripts were rare and highly sought after by the intellectual elite of the epoch. A publishing house almost always had a hundred capable slave penmen, who copied around a thousand books a year.

Additionally, Publius had a large number of genuine friends in Rome who were more than happy to keep him informed, and

thus he was updated in Pompeii regarding the events of the city that used to absorb his life's best initiatives.

He also frequently received information about Plinius Severus through dedicated friends and he took comfort in the news of his now commendable conduct. Due to his accomplishments in Gaul, Plinius had been transferred to Rome after 73, where his changed, albeit belated, behavior had won him a respectable and illustrious position following in the traditions of his father's honesty in the administrative duties of the Empire.

Plinius, however, had never once tried to contact either his wife or the senator, the latter whom destiny compelled him to regard as a dedicated and loving father, although he was fully aware of the extreme misfortune of his family. In his heart, Plinius did not disdain the idea of returning to the bosom of his loved ones; however, he wished to do so in such a way as to remove all doubt as to his considerable efforts at regeneration. Filling posts of trust in the Flavian administration, he used his efforts to attain a position that entailed greater moral challenges in order to offer the proof of his spiritual rehabilitation to his family members.

The year 78 passed in the serenity of the beautiful landscape of Campania[63]. While Tibur was a resort for healing and rest for the wealthiest, Pompeii was the city for the healthiest and happiest. Superb marble structures abounded at every step in its public streets, as well as the most beautiful buildings in the aristocratic capital of the Empire. Illustrious assemblies of educated and cultured patricians gathered in the sumptuous temples of the city, which, at the foot of Vesuvius, was peopled with singers and poets, and illuminated by a wondrous sky filled with smiling sunshine or embroidered with twinkling stars.

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[63] Campania is a region of Italy [where Pompeii is located], and is also associated with the word Campagna, which in Italian literally means "Country" or "Countryside." http://www.lacampania.com. – Tr.

Publius Lentulus greatly appreciated Ana's simple and convincing conversations. She had grown old at Flavia's side, like a beautiful figure of old ivory. One could see his interest, emotion and joy at listening to her commentaries on the excellence of the Christian principles whenever they recalled their stay in far off Judea.

In these friendly after-dinner conversations, the three of them discussed the figure of Christ and the sublime lessons of his doctrine. By the force of circumstances, the senator was now better able to ponder the magnificent postulates of the still-fragmented and nearly-unknown Gospel and to link the benevolent and holy principles of Christianity to the personality of its divine founder.

The three of them, their brows wrinkled from their experiences over the years, would spend hours on the broad terrace under the soft starlight, enjoying the caress of the night breezes coming to them like the gentle breath of celestial inspirations.

Sometimes, Flavia would play a little music that would flow from her harp like a vivid sigh of pain and longing, touching her father's heart immersed in the depths of bitter memories. To the blind, music is always more spiritualized and pure, since its art speaks deeply to the soul without the scattered emotions of the material senses.

One night, conforming to their habit of many years, we find our three characters on the spacious terrace of the villa in Pompeii in sweet reminiscences. For the past seven years nearly all of their conversations had been about the personality of the Messiah and the exalted purity of his doctrine. This exchange took place with the utmost discretion because the followers of Christianity continued to be persecuted, although with less cruelty.

Besides, they were old and feeble, and thus their conversation held no interest for their younger and happier friends.

After a few recollections and comments by Ana about the anguished afternoon on Calvary, the old senator said with conviction:

"As for me, I'm sure that Jesus will remain forever in the world as the highest symbol of consolation and moral fortitude for all the suffering and downhearted! ... Ever since I became physically blind, I've been trying to comprehend his greatness, but I'm still unable to capture the full extent of his sublimity and his teachings. As if it were yesterday, I remember the beautiful twilight when I saw him for the first time along the shores of Tiberias."

"Me too," said Ana. "I cannot forget those delightful and clear afternoons when all of us servants and sufferers of Capernaum gathered by the great lake, waiting for the gentle bliss of his words."

And as if she were watching the parade of her dearest memories with the eyes of her imagination, the old servant continued:

"The Master loved the company of Simon and the sons of Zebedee, and he almost always came in one of their boats in answer to our supplications."

"What amazes me most," said Publius Lentulus, impressed, "is that, from what we know, Jesus was neither a doctor of the law nor a priest trained by human schools. But his words seemed anointed by a divine grace. His serene and indescribable look pierced the depths of the soul and his benevolent smile had the affability of one who, possessing all truth, knew how to understand and forgive human wrongs. I've been pondering his teachings every day these past few years, and I have found them to be revolutionary and new because they tear down all preconceptions about race and family, uniting souls in a grand spiritual embrace of fraternity and tolerance. Human philosophy has never told us that the afflicted and peacemakers are blessed in heaven; but with his renewing lessons, we can change our concept of who the most virtuous persons are. For the supreme and merciful Most High God, they are not the richest and most powerful people in the world, but those who are purest and most just, however humble and poor. His compassionate and

loving words brought teachings that only today I can understand in the dense and mournful darkness of my suffering."

"Father," asked Flavia, extremely interested in the conversation, "did you see the prophet many times?"

"No, my dearest. Before the ominous day of his infamous death on the cross, I saw him only once, when you were little and ill. But that was enough for me to receive an enlightening lesson from his sublime words for my entire life. Only now do I understand his kindly exhortation, and I realize that my life at the time was actually a lost opportunity! ... Also, at the moment of our encounter his profound words told me that I was face to face with the most wonderful opportunity of all my days, adding, in his extraordinary benevolence, that I could take advantage of it right then or millennia later, but I was unable to grasp the symbolic meaning of his words."

"All of Jesus' bestowals were based on the holy and consoling Truth," added Ana, now enjoying the full friendship of her masters.

"Yes," said Publius, focusing on his memories, "my personal observations have led me to believe that as well.

"If I had taken advantage of Jesus' exhortation that day, perhaps I would have avoided more than half of the bitter trials that the world held in store for me ... If I had tried to understand his lesson of love and humility, I would have looked for Andre of Gioras personally and would have made amends for the evil I caused him with the imprisonment of his inexperienced son. I would've shown him my interest personally and wouldn't have trusted only the irresponsible people in my service ... Guided by this concern, it wouldn't have been at all hard to find Saul. I could have trusted Flaminius Severus as my confidant in Rome regarding my desire to make amends, and thus I would have avoided that painful tragedy in my life as a father.

"If I had sufficiently realized his charity in healing my daughter, I would've become more familiar with the spiritual treasure of Livia's heart, following her in the same faith and perhaps falling together with her in the wretched arena. That would have been nothing in comparison with the long, drawn-out agonies of my destiny. I would've been less vain and more human if I had understood his lesson of fraternity."

"Father," interjected Flavia in order to comfort his sorrow, "if Jesus is wisdom and truth, he would understand the reasons for your attitude, knowing that you were forced by circumstances to hold to this or that principle."

"Dearest Flavia," replied Publius thoughtfully, "over these past few years I think I have arrived at the most solid conclusions regarding pain and destiny ... Through the grief-stricken personal experiences the world has offered me, I now believe above all that we ourselves contribute toward increasing or lessening the rigors of our spiritual situation in the duties of life. Now that I believe in the existence of an all-powerful God, the source of all mercy and love, I know that the law of God is one of supreme good for all. This code of solidarity and love must rule all beings, and within its divine provisions, happiness is heaven's predestination for all souls. Every time we stumble on the road due to our relative freedom to favor evil or practice it, we transgress the law of God, incurring a debt that plays out in our misfortunes.

"Notwithstanding my own personal actions, which increased my grievous sorrows, and considering Jesus the mediator between us and the One his exalted word called Our Father, today I wonder if I didn't actually commit a wrong by forcing his mercy with my fatherly plea when you were little so that you could continue to live in this world for the love of our family!"

Flavia Lentulia and Ana had been following the senator's thinking for many years, and they were now amazed by his moral conclusions in light of his ability to link the painful lessons of his destiny to the principles preached by the Nazarene prophet.

"Actually, Father," said Flavia after a long pause, "I get the feeling that the divine forces had decided to take me away from the world, considering the grievous pain waiting for me on the harsh pathway of my unfortunate destiny ..."

"That's right," interrupted the senator, "you know what I'm talking about. Life and suffering teach us to better understand the plan of the divine order's designs.

"Ancient initiates of the Egyptian and Indian mystery religions believed we return to earth many times in other bodies!"

The old patrician paused at this point.

He remembered the dreams he used to have, where in the raiment of a consul known as Publius Lentulus Sura in the times of Catilina, he inflicted his political enemies with the torture of blindness with blazing steel.

A flood of new and sublime conclusions came to his mind, like renewing inspirations of divine wisdom.

After a few seconds, however, as if the clock of his imagination had stopped for a few minutes in order for his heart to catch up with the throng of memories in the desert of his subjective world, he continued, comforted in the belated possession of the itinerary of his embittered destiny:

"Today I believe, my dearest, that if the wise powers of heaven had decided on your death when you were small – a decision that I may possibly have contradicted with my anguished father's plea, discovered silently by the Messiah of Nazareth in the recess of my proud, wretched heart – it was that you should be freed from the prison that held you so that you could better prepare yourself for resignation, fortitude

and suffering. Surely you would have been reborn later on to encounter the same circumstances and same enemies, but you would have had a stronger organism to resist the painful struggles of earthly existence.

"Thus, we realize today that there is a sovereign and merciful law that we must obey, without interfering in its operation of mercy and wisdom.

"As for myself, I used to enjoy great health and a spiritual fiber filled with energy, but I feel that in other lives I acted terribly and committed heinous crimes.

"My current existence had to be an endless string of sorrows, but I see belatedly that if I had entered the path of the good, I would have redeemed a mountain of sins from my dark and criminal past. Now I understand Christ's lesson as an immortal teaching of humility and love, of charity and forgiveness – secure paths for all the conquests of the spirit, far from the dark circles of suffering!"

And remembering the dream he had conveyed to Flaminius in times past, he concluded:

"Expiation would not be necessary for perfecting the soul if we actually comprehended the good and practiced it in actions, words and thoughts. Even if I was born condemned to the sentence of blindness under such tragic circumstances, perhaps I could have avoided the consummation of this trial if I had abandoned my pride and had become a humble and good man.

"One gesture of generosity on my part would have changed Andre of Gioras's inner dispositions; but the reality is that, despite all the priceless suggestions from On High, I continued in my selfishness, vanity and criminal mercilessness. Consequently, I deepened my blatant debts to the divine justice, and I cannot hope for magnanimity from the judges that await me."

A sorrowful tear shone in the corner of Publius Lentulus lightless eyes. Listening eagerly to his words and concepts, and rejoicing in the realization that her proud master had arrived at the most accurate conclusions of an evangelical order – the same conclusions she had reached in her reflections of old age – Ana explained kindly, her simple and incisive affirmations arriving at the right moment to console everyone:

"Senator, everything you've said is discerning and accurate. I fully believe in the law of multiple lives, which favors our learning experience in the world's pain-filled struggles. In his divine lessons, Jesus stated that no one could enter the kingdom of heaven without being born again. I believe, however, that in spite of your material blindness and your sufferings, which I understand in all their anguishing intensity, you must have a soul filled with belief and hope in the spiritual future, because Christ also assured us that our Father does not want even one of his sheep to be lost!"

Publius Lentulus felt an inexplicable force bursting inside him, a strangely comforting, unknown source enabling him to confront all his pain with dignity.

"Yes," he said softly, "always Jesus! ... Forever Jesus! ... Without him and without his teachings that fill us with courage and faith in reaching a kingdom of peace in our soul's future, I don't know what would become of human beings, enslaved in the prison of earthly sufferings ... Seven years of infinite hardships in the solitude of my dead eyes have felt like seven centuries of cruel and painful learning! But this is the only way that I could finally grasp the lesson of the Crucified One! Upon pronouncing the words "Crucified One," the old patrician's thought went back to Passover in Jerusalem in the year 33. He remembered that he had held the divine Messenger's fate in his hands, and only now did he realize the tremendous

responsibility he was involved in on that unforgettable and sorrowful day. After a long pause, he said:

"And to think that, for such a soul, there wasn't a single decisive gesture of defense on our part in the anguishing moment of the shameless cross ... Now that I live only in my bitter remembrances, it seems that I can still see him before my eyes, with the sad marks of his flagellation!

"In him was concentrated all the supreme love of heaven for the redemption of the world's miseries; even so, I saw no one fighting for his freedom or acting effectively on his behalf."

"Except for one person," said Ana unexpectedly.

"Who?" asked the old blind man, surprised. "I didn't realize that anyone had defended him."

"That's because until now you were unaware of the fact that once the sad procession had left the provincial Roman court, your praiseworthy spouse and my unforgettable benefactor responded to our pleas and went immediately to see Pontius Pilate to ask him to intercede on behalf of the Nazarene Messiah, unjustly condemned by the infuriated mob. The governor met her in his private room, where the noble woman pleaded in vain for his compassion and mercy for the divine Master."

"You mean that Livia actually went to Pilate to petition for Jesus?" the senator asked, interested and perplexed, recalling that heartrending afternoon in his life and remembering Fulvia's slander concerning his wife.

"Yes," the servant replied, "for Jesus, her magnanimous heart disdained all conventions and all prejudices. She didn't hesitate to answer our pleas and did everything she could to save the Messiah from a shameful death!"

Publius Lentulus felt great difficulty in expressing his thoughts. His throat was suffocated from the emotions brought on by his bitter memories, and his dead eyes brimmed with tears.

Ana, however, recalled all the details of that dolorous day and told the senator and his daughter all she had felt while they listened to her, overcome with tears of pain, gratitude and longing for Livia.

And so it was that, at the end of each day, under the brilliant and fragrant sky of Pompeii, and in the tender and sad light of the bitter lessons of destiny, these three souls prepared themselves for the consoling realities of death in the wake of beloved recollections.

X
The Last Moments of Pompeii

On a bright, shiny morning in the year 79, all of Pompeii broke out in festive noise.

The city had received the visit of an illustrious quaestor of the Empire, and on that day all the streets were alive with noisy merriment. The administration wanted to celebrate the event, and in a few hours, the dazzling festivities were to begin in the amphitheater in the midst of general gaiety.

The event held special importance for old senator Publius Lentulus since Pompeii's distinguished guest had brought him a significant message in addition to honorable respects from Titus Flavius Vespasian, who had succeeded his father as emperor.

And there was more.

Plinius Severus would be among the illustrious quaestor's entourage. Now matured and completely reformed,

he believed himself redeemed before his wife and the man he regarded as a father.

On that day, Ana directed the domestic activities of numerous slaves and servants in preparation for the reception while Publius and his daughter embraced each other expressively because of the belated surprise destiny had reserved for them. Having been notified by messengers from the caravan of illustrious patricians, they gave free reign to their hearts' most grateful emotions in sweet anticipation of welcoming the prodigal son who had been away from their loving arms for so many years.

Just before noon a dazzling array of vehicles, horses in full harness, and vestments inlaid with glittering jewels pulled up to the gates of the placid and gracious villa, arousing the admiration and curious interest of the neighbors and followed by a whirlwind of embraces, endearments and comforting, kind words.

Nearly all the patricians on this excursion through Campania knew the senator and his family, making the event a sweet meeting of souls.

Publius Lentulus gave Plinius a lengthy embrace as a beloved son who had returned from far away after a far too long absence. Inwardly, he felt an enormous effusion of affection, which he managed to control so as not to arouse unjustified surprise from the onlookers.

"Father, my father!" said Flaminius's son in a discreet tone nearly imperceptible to his ears as he kissed his forehead haloed by gray hair, "have you forgiven me?"

"Oh, son, what took you so long?! ... I love you as much as ever, and may heaven bless you!" replied the old blind man, filled with emotion.

A moment later, after the sweet reunion of Plinius and his wife, the quaestor announced in the midst of the general silence:

"Senator, I am honored to bring you a precious memento from Caesar, along with a message of recognition from the high political administration of the Empire. It is one of the strongest and most justifying reasons for my stay in Pompeii, and I have entrusted our friend Plinius Severus to present you with these mementos, which represent one of the most meaningful tributes from the Empire to one of its most loyal servants!"

Publius Lentulus was overcome with the supreme emotion of that moment.

The tribute from the emperor, the loving presence of friends, the return of his son-in-law to his paternal arms – all made his soul dizzily happy.

His eyes, however, could see nothing. From the depths of his darkness, he heard those kindhearted honors as an exile from the light, from whom the dearest and sweetest memories were exhumed.

"Friends," he said, wiping a hidden tear from his darkened eyes, "this is all the greatest reward of my entire life. Our emperor is an extremely generous soul, because truth is, I have done nothing to deserve such recognition from my fatherland. My heart, however, rejoices with you, for our meeting here is a symbol of unity and work in the highest positions of the Empire!"

At that moment, someone lifted his hands to his moist lips, leaving two burning tears among the wrinkles.

In a spontaneous gesture, Plinius Severus had knelt down and kissed Publius's hands, giving free expression to his love and recognition while at the same time delivering the imperial message that the old senator was unable to read.

Publius Lentulus wept, unable to say a single word – such was the emotion that weighed on his heart. The onlookers gazed at him, their eyes moist with tears.

Flaminius's son could no longer contain himself, and demonstrating his spiritual regeneration, said tenderly:

"Do not weep, my dear father, for everyone is here to share your joy! Before all our Roman friends and with the homage of the Empire, I offer you my regenerated heart forever! ... Though your eyes are blind, your spirit is not; it has always sought to dissipate the darkness and remove the obstacles in our way! ... You will continue to guide my steps – or rather our steps – in righteous conduct by means of your old traditions of sincerity and personal endeavor! ... You will return to Rome, and with your rehabilitated son you will organize the Aventine palace once again ... I will be, from then on and forever after, a sentinel for your soul to love and watch over you! ... I will take my wife fully under my care, and each and every day I will build a new future for the three of us with the miracles of my undying love! New joy will blossom in our Aventine house, because I will fill all your hours with the grand and holy love of someone who, having gone through all the hard experiences of life, now knows how to value his own treasures!"

The old senator, broken by the years and harshest sufferings, remained standing, caressing his son-in-law's hair, also whitened by the winters of life. Heavy tears burst forth from the wall of his blindness; an indescribable emotion spread to everybody's hearts.

Flavia Lentulia wept also, overcome with an overwhelming happiness at the end of such lengthy and dejected hopes! Some of their friends wanted to break the painful solemnity of that unexpected scene, but the quaestor himself, leader of the caravan of illustrious patricians, hid in a corner, moved to tears.

Publius Lentulus knew that only he could change the mood of that poignant moment. Controlling his emotions, he declared:

"Get up, my son! I have done nothing to warrant your thanking me on bended knees ... Why do you speak to me like this? ... We will return to Rome in a few days – yes – because

all your wishes are our wishes ... We will return to Aventinus together, and we will live to remember the past and revere the memory of our ancestors!"

And after a pause, he continued with almost optimistic words:

"My friends, I am moved and grateful for the kindness and affection of you all! But what is this? Everyone quiet? Remember that I can only see you through words. Now what about today's celebration?"

The senator's questions broke the silence, and the rousing noise of a few minutes before resumed once more. The torrent of conversations melded with the clanking of the wine glasses in their heavy style of the epoch.

While the visitors gathered on the spacious triclinium for light refreshments, Plinius Severus and his wife exchanged tender confidences, sometimes about the plans they had for the years that were still left to them in the world, sometimes about the memories of the slow, bitter days of the distant past.

However, insistent requests required the presence of the quaestor and his party at the place where the celebrations were to occur.

The circus had been carefully prepared and not a single opportunity was lost in carrying out the smallest details of the great Roman festivities.

While everyone bid farewell to the senator and his daughter, Plinius Severus, in a display of worldly happiness, turned to Publius after tenderly embracing his wife, saying:

"Father, because of the circumstances, I must accompany the quaestor to the festivities, but I will be back in a few hours to stay with you for a month so that we can prepare for our return to Rome."

"Very well, son," replied the old senator, supremely comforted, "go with our friends and represent me to the authorities. Tell everyone about my feelings and give them my sincere thanks."

Alone once again, the senator sensed that those endearing and happy feelings might be the last ones of his life. His heart beat fast in his old breast, as if a heavy cloud of sad thoughts enveloped him. Yes, the return of Plinius to his fatherly arms was the final joy of his heavy-hearted old age. Now he knew that his daughter could count on her husband on the paths of her tormented destiny, and that all that was left to him, Publius, was to resignedly wait for death. Pondering the loving words of Flaminius's son and his distant past, Publius Lentulus believed in his heart that it was too late to return to Aventinus, and that returning to Rome would signify to his reprobate soul nothing but a symbol of the tomb.

During the festivities' spectacles, Plinius Severus, already in the autumn of his life, made plans for the future. He would try to redeem all his former wrongs before his loving and dear family. He would assume the management of his elderly father-by-heart's affairs, relieving him of all the troubling concerns of material life.

From time to time the applause of the crowd interrupted his daydreams. Most of Pompeii's population was there in full party mode, giving ovations to the triumphant ones. People from all the environs, especially from Herculanum, had come to enjoy the favorite entertainment of those remote times.

Mixed in with the athletes and gladiators were musicians, singers and dancers, everything a rustling of silks, a delightful brattling of boisterous joy to the sound of flutes and lutes.

At one point, however, everyone's attention was drawn to a strange and inexplicable occurrence. A thick plume of smoke began rising from Vesuvius. No one knew the cause of the unusual phenomenon.

The games continued enthusiastically, but suddenly, impressive flames appeared in the midst of the smoky column rising into the sky in fantastic billows.

Plinius Severus, like everyone else, was puzzled by the strange and inexplicable phenomenon.

In just minutes, confusion and terror gripped the amphitheater.

In the midst of the general and unforeseen chaos, Flaminius's son still had time to approach the quaestor, who was surrounded by relatives who lived in the city. He spoke to him optimistically, although he could not entirely hide his inner fears:

"My friend, we must stay calm! By Jupiter's beard! ... What about our courage and our fiber?"

But in a few seconds the earth trembled under their feet in unknown and sinister trepidations. A few columns toppled heavily to the ground while several gold and precious stone-adorned statues rolled from their niches.

Embracing his daughter and surrounded by numerous women, the quaestor said, deeply worried:

"Plinius, we must get back to the galleys – now!"

But the Roman official no longer heard his orders. Anxiously, he was attempting to break through the crowd that was now trying to flee the circus en masse, trampling children and older people.

At the end of his super-human efforts, he managed to reach the street, but every spot was filled with people who had fled their houses to the screams of "Fire, Fire! ... Vesuvius ..."

Plinius saw that all the streets were filled with desperate people, vehicles and terrified animals.

With enormous difficulty, he overcame every obstacle, but now Vesuvius was shooting an indescribable and immense flame toward the sky, as if the deepest bowels of the earth had been set on fire.

A rain of ash, at first almost imperceptible, began to fall while the ground continued to shake with deafening, terrifying noises.

From one instant to the next one could hear the frightening roar of falling columns or buildings demolished by the seismic tremors while at the same time the smoke from the volcano started to eclipse the comforting solar light.

Immersed in dense blackness and overcome with unspeakable terror, Pompeii was witnessing its final moments in desperate tribulation.[64]

In the Lentulus villa, the slaves immediately sensed the approaching danger. In the first minutes, the horses whinnied strangely and the fowls escaped in desperation.

After the fall of the first columns that held up the building, all the senator's servants quickly abandoned their posts, wanting to save their lives elsewhere. Only Ana remained with her masters, conveying to them the horrors of what was happening.

In justifiable anxiety, the three listened to the horrendous noise of the unforgettable catastrophe of the Empire. The villa itself was already half destroyed, the ashes coming through the open spaces from the falling roof tiles to begin their work of slow suffocation. The three were anxious for Plinius's return in order to decide what steps to take, but the old senator, whose heart was not misled in his sorrowful forebodings, said in an almost resigned tone:

"Ana, bring Simeon's cross and let's say the prayer you were taught by the disciples of the Messiah! ... My soul is telling me that the end of our earthly pilgrimage has come!"

While the servant ran to look for the old Samaritan relic in spite of the danger of the swaying walls, Publius Lentulus listened to the deafening noise of the torn and mangled earth and the terrified and dreadful screams of the people mixed with the tremendous roar of the volcano that had become an

[64] This passage arouses the interest and attention of the curious and engaged reader due to its similarity to the description in another valuable, mediumistic novel, *Herculanum*, by the Count of Rochester. –Publisher's note.

immense and indescribable furnace, filling the entire city with ash and boiling lava. The senator then remembered what Christ had stated in the Galilee of days gone by when he asserted that all of Rome's grandeur was quite miserable and that in a brief moment the Empire could be reduced to a handful of dust. His heart beat wildly in those final moments, but the old servant had returned and was kneeling serenely, holding Simeon and Livia's memento in her hands as she prayed in a moving, heartfelt voice:

"Our Father, who art in heaven ... hallowed be thy name ... Thy kingdom come ... Thy will be done ... on earth as it is in heaven..."

The servant's voice suddenly went mute. Her body fell under new debris, while she felt her spirit being lifted by the venerable Samaritan, who transported her immediately to the highest spiritual spheres, such was the nature of her heart, illuminated by the most anguishing pains and testimonies of the earthly experience.

"Ana! ... Ana!" Publius and Flavia cried out in sobs of utter distress, both feeling for the first time the misfortune of their supreme isolation, without sight or guide!

Someone, however, had broken through all the ruins, arriving quickly at that inner chamber. Embracing Publius and his daughter, he shouted in a choked voice: "Flavia! Father! I'm here..."

Plinius had arrived for the final moment. Flavia Lentulia clasped him lovingly in her arms while the old senator, semi-asphyxiated, took his son's hands, the three of them holding each other in a final embrace.

Flavia and Plinius wanted to speak, but a thick layer of ash had entered the room through the enormous cracks in the half-destroyed villa.

One more shudder of the ground and the columns that were still standing fell on the three of them, robbing them of

their last bit of strength and making them fall, intertwined forever under a pile of debris ...

In the thick darkness, winged and gentle creatures hovered in prayer or actively comforted the prostrate hearts of the unfortunates condemned to destruction.

Over the three buried bodies hovered the radiant spirit of Livia, along with numerous spirit workers assisting with devotion and precision in the task of detaching the spirits of the doomed ones.

Resting her luminous, pure hands on the crushed head of her spent and dying husband, Livia lifted her eyes to the darkened firmament and prayed with the gentleness of her faith and her immaculate sentiments.

"Jesus, meek and divine Master: this anguished hour is surely a symbol of the wrongs and crimes committed throughout tenebrous incarnations; but you, O Lord, are all hope, all wisdom and all mercy! ... Bless our spirits in this harsh and painful moment! ... Ease my twin soul's suffering and grant him this hour the warrant of his freedom! ... O magnanimous Savior of the world, allay all of his poignant regrets, his devastating sorrows! ... Grant rest to his grieving and sorrowful heart before he returns anew to the somber plots of reincarnations on this world of exile and painful tears ... Lord, he is no longer the vain despot of the past, but a heart inclined to the good and mercy preached in your doctrine of love and redemption. Under the weight of bitter and redeeming trials, his tendencies have been spiritualized on the path of your Truth and Life!"

While Livia prayed, the senator, embracing his already-dead children, let out his last moan, a heavy tear glittering in his dead eyes.

Legions of spirit beings volitated[65] for several days in the gloomy, sad skies of Pompeii.

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[65] The act or power of flying. http://dictionary.reference.com. A term used frequently by spirit authors. – Tr.

At the end of a lengthy period of distress, Publius Lentulus and his children awoke to the spirit world, right there over the dark tomb of the dead city.

In vain, the senator called for Ana or any other of his servants in the painful illusion of material life, with the effects of physical blindness persisting in his spirit body, the same as it had in the long torture of his final years in the flesh. However, after his first lamentations, he heard a voice softly saying to him:

"Publius, my friend, do not seek help any longer in earthly means, because all your powers ended with your remains on the dark and sad face of the earth! Turn to Almighty God, whose mercy and wisdom have been given to us through the love of His Lamb, Jesus Christ!"

Publius Lentulus could not see who spoke to him, but recognized the voice of Flaminius Severus. He gave vent to a torrent of fervent prayers and tears.

In spite of Livia's constant dedication, for several days his soul remained trapped in anguishing nightmares in his first moments of life in the Beyond. Flaminius and other selfless workers who had been waiting for him in the spirit realm were continuously assisting him.

After these sincere supplications flowing from the recesses of his heart, Publius felt his inner world clearing up ... Next to his dear children, he recovered his sight and recognized his loved ones with tears of love and appreciation at the gates beyond the grave.

Numerous characters from this story were there: Flaminius, Calpurnia, Agrippa, Pompilius Crassus, Emilianus Lucius and many others; but the anguished eyes of the ex-senator sought someone in vain in that loving and friendly assembly.

After all the expressions of affection and joy, he turned purposely to Flaminius.

"Livia's absence seems strange to you," said Flaminius with an affable and benevolent look. "You will not be able to see her until you manage to divest yourself through prayer and good intentions of all the painful and noxious impressions of the earth. She has held you in her heart in sincere and fervent supplications for your renewal, but our group consists of spirits still very attached to earth, and we have been waiting for the return of its last components so that together we may establish a new itinerary for future reincarnations. Centuries of work and pain await us on the path of redemption and growth, but we need, above all, to find our strength in Jesus, the source of all love and all faith, for the higher realizations of our souls!"

Publius Lentulus wept, touched by strange and indescribable emotions.

"My friend," continued Flaminius lovingly, "ask Jesus, for all of us, the mercy of this light in a new beginning!"

Publius knelt down, and bathed in tears, concentrated his heart on Jesus in ardent and silent supplication ... There, in the solitude of his intrepid and sincere soul, he offered his repentance to the Lamb of God, his hopes for the future, his promises of faith and work for the centuries to come!

Everyone joined in his prayer, overcome with tears and immersed in vibrations of ineffable consolation.

Then they saw a luminous and flowery path open up in the dark and sad skies over Campania, and on it, as if descending from the resplendent gardens of Paradise, appeared Livia and Ana, embracing each other as if Jesus were still sending a symbolic teaching to those souls imprisoned on earth, revealing to them that, in any situation, the incarnate soul can seek His kingdom of light and peace, of life and love, in the humble tunic of a slave as well as in the pompous raiment of masters.

The old patrician beheld the radiant figure of his wife, and in ecstasy he closed his eyes, bathed in tears of remorse and repentance. But soon, lips as light as mist touched his forehead like the gentle touch of a divine lily. And while his wondering heart was awash in tears of joy and gratitude to Jesus, the entire caravan, under the powerful impulse of the fervent prayers of those two redeemed souls, rose to higher spheres like a magnificent group of luminous butterflies of the Infinite for rest and learning before entering a new stage of regeneration and purifying work!

The End.

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Two Thousand Years Ago

On the banks of Lake Gennesaret, Publius Lentulus (Emmanuel) has an encounter with Christ; Publius has gone to beseech Jesus to heal his little daughter, Flavia, who has contracted leprosy.

Moved and magnetized by emotions he has never felt before, he hears the Master tell him:

"… It would have been better if you had come publicly and in broad daylight in order to learn once and for all the sublime lesson of faith and humility.

"… After many years of deviation from the path of the good due to your blatant wrongs, today you have come to the turning point for the regeneration of you entire life.

"… It is up to you, however, to take advantage of it either now or a few millennia from now…

"… But no one can impose an act that is against your conscience if it is your desire to spurn this blessed moment indefinitely!"

He perceives that Jesus is praying. That very night, his daughter begins to improve noticeably until she is completely well.

What are the consequences of this encounter with the Divine Master?

- Flavia is healed.
- Livia, Publius's wife, a patrician woman, coverts to Christianity.
- Publius returns to his political affairs but refuses to believe that Jesus was the author of his daughter's recovery.

Emmanuel narrates this personal experience with the richness of detail that characterizes all his books so that we can ponder the precious "moments" that we are offered throughout our lives; moments that are often wasted, thereby retarding our progress and evolution.

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